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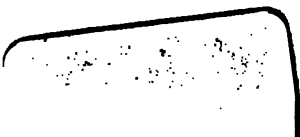
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RITA:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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RITA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

CHAPTER I.

A FEW days later I received some most unexpected news from my mother, which obliged me to return to Paris. Her letter ran as follows:

“MY DEAR CHILD,—

“I have only time for a few lines to-day, but cannot let the post go out without letting you know the happy news! I am in such a flutter I can hardly write! I dare say you guess what it is. I dare say you saw it all along. I never mentioned the subject to you, or in my letters, for fear it was a delusion; but I *thought* I saw it from the beginning. Do you remember the day he first called? Since you left, he has been

here *every day*, and this morning he has actually *proposed* in due form. Think of little Rose as Mrs. Charles Murray! Only seventeen! She really fancies herself desperately in love with him, even if he had not a farthing, instead of such magnificent prospects! Fancy how delighted your father is! He wrote—I mean Charles Murray—to his father, and obtained his consent before he proposed, which is very gratifying and satisfactory. They are gone out together. She looks so beautiful in her half-mourning (I got her a white bonnet last week, for her black was getting so shabby). I don't wonder at his falling in love with her. Do you know, he says he was always rather afraid of you! Ah! my darling, nothing men *are* so afraid of as a *clèver* wife—but only think, after all, of your not being the *first*! I hope the country air has brought back the roses to your cheeks. The dear boys went to school yesterday; it was a sad parting for *me*, for I could not help feeling"—(here followed something that had been blotted out)—“but this has put me into such good spirits to-day, I am quite another person. Ernest remains with us until after the

wedding (which is to take place as soon as possible); then your father will go with him to England, and see him on board his ship for India—poor dear fellow! You must come back *at once*, dear. I have quantities for you to do. Now that our good Lateward is gone, I have no one, you know, for Rose is so much occupied, going about with him. Heaven bless you, my darling!

“Ever your affectionate mother,
“C. P.”

In spite of my mother's assumption that I was fully prepared for the intelligence her letter contained, it was a great surprise,—I had almost written *shock*. I was glad: I was very glad, of course. But what a child she was! At least I had been accustomed to consider and treat her 'as such, until quite lately: and even then, was so completely and selfishly engrossed, that whenever the image of my sister crossed my thoughts, it was only as a gleam of sunshine in the home-picture—a morning gleam, as yet far removed from the glare and heat of mid-day passions. She had not made a confidante of me—she had never poured into my ear

the secret tale of fluttering hopes and fears; and I had no right to expect it. It was very natural: my mother had, in fact, been more of a sister to her. And yet I was very fond of Rose, though there was so little sympathy between us; but when I thought of what this last year had been to *me*, I felt inexpressibly thankful she should be spared all that I had gone through, and be safely havened from all future storms by the quiet hearthstone of an English home. True, I knew little of Charles Murray, but all the man was written in such clear, open characters, that whatever might be thought of his mental powers, his candour and true heart it was impossible to doubt.

I began folding up my dresses and laying them in my trunk. My kind old friends received the announcement that I must leave them with loud regrets. Notwithstanding the wide disparity of our years, and the wider disparity of our tastes and feelings, they were *friends*; I could not leave them without the sorrowful reflection that I had few such now, and these I might not see again for years! We all three mingled our tears over an early breakfast the follow-

ing morning, and I was publicly embraced outside the gilt gates by both the General and Madame, in the face of the crowded diligence; after which, being given over, with many injunctions, to the care of a steady old shopkeeper, Paris-bound, I was stuffed into the bowels of the *intérieur*, with a large bunch of flowers on my knee, which, soon fading, left the fine aroma of ham-sandwiches in my bag predominant. I had rather a pleasant journey, as my old gentleman was obliging enough to drop asleep, and leave me in undisturbed possession of my own thoughts, during the greater part of the way. The only other occupant of this portion of the diligence was a young priest, who shrank into his corner upon my entering, and appeared to think there was contamination in my aspect, so studiously did he avoid me, his eyes fixed upon his breviary. I looked out of window, for my part; and found much interest and amusement in watching the haymakers in the fields, as we passed, and in studying character at inn doors, when we stopped to change horses. It was my first journey alone. I felt very independent, and thought how I should like

to be travelling in an English stage-coach (which I knew by sight, from a coloured print in my father's room of one driving down a hill in a great cloud of dust). This stage-coach should be bound for the north of England—*where*, I was not exactly clear; but a certain face should be at the window when we stopped, waiting there to meet me —

Instead of which (foolish diligence-dream!) comes the handsome face of my father, when we drive into the Messageries' courtyard in Paris; not without a cloud upon it, though, for we are half an hour behind our time, and he expresses his disgust in very forcible language at having had to wait so long.

Beside him stands a tall, fair young man, who bows distantly, but whose bold laughing eyes I recognise at once, and throw my arms round his neck.

“Why, Ernest, what a giant you are grown! How long is it since we have seen you? It must be surely more than two years?”

“Just two, Queen of Tarts, since we had

our last quarrel. Last holidays I spent at Dacre. And now, may it please your Majesty, is there to be peace or war between us?"

"Oh, peace by all means, since you are only a visitor in my dominions—and your size, too, rather alarms me. You're very much improved in appearance; I hope equally so in other ways."

"Thank you: ditto to you. 'Pon my soul! you're a devilish sight better-looking than I expected. What one may almost call 'a fine-looking girl.'"

"Yes, grown fat, I see, and actually got some colour in your cheeks," said my father; then jocosely added, as we all three walked away together, leaving my trunk to follow with a porter, "Well, the filly's cut you out, Rita: won in a canter, you see! You've got to wear the yellow shoes, and all your own fault, Lady Greybrook told me."

"There, father, we will not talk about that. Dear Rose's marriage ought to satisfy you for a long time to come. I'm so glad. He just seems made for her. If I am any judge of physiognomy, he has a fine disposition—frank and free."

"It is more than his father has, then, if by 'free' you mean *liberal*. Sir Charles isn't so in purse, any more than politics."

"I am a friend to conservative principles," said I, dryly.

"He gives Charles a most paltry allowance, considering his fortune; and the settlement he makes on Rose would be mean for his own steward. However, one mustn't quarrel with one's bread and butter, I suppose, and the entail is a clear eight thousand a year."

"How do you like our new brother, Ernest?"

"Oh, a capital fellow; given me such a splendid gun to take out to India. Tiger-shooting, I suppose, is the only thing to be done in that cursed country."

"I should think there was a good deal else to be done, if you looked about you. But don't you like the idea of going out?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"As the governor said just now, one mustn't quarrel with one's bread and butter."

"I hope you've been getting on with your Hindostanee?"

"I've worked at it—I have, indeed—but it's so deuced hard."

"Well, I hope you've learnt something at school besides swearing?"

"Meaning that I could have done that at home, eh?" he whispered, laughing, as my father stopped to speak to some one. "I say, the governor's hard up, again, Rita. He asked Charlie Murray to lend him a hundred this morning, and Charlie told him he hadn't a hundred at his banker's. That's why he's so savage about it. Charlie's very wide awake about money."

I sighed, and walked on in silence. Here was this boy, already *rusé* in the world's ways—all the freshness, the delightful *gullibility* of youth, gone! You wouldn't "catch him napping," as he informed me; and I believed him. But I felt the sooner he went out to India, and away from my father's influence, the better.

I was shocked to find how ill my mother was looking. The brilliant spirits she was in could not conceal the ravages of illness. But she spoke more cheeringly of herself, and I was too willing to believe that the

worn face was only the result of some sleepless nights following days of excitement. Those that followed my return were busy and uneventful, except for the two persons on whom all thoughts were now centred, and for whom each hour, now, brought felicitations and marriage-gifts—plans for the future, openly or secretly discussed—tête-à-tête walks in the shady alleys of the Tuileries. No two lovers ever looked more radiant and happy than they.

My brother often took me out walking of an evening, and we became great friends. With all his faults—and he had still plenty—there was something to me very attractive about him; and he returned the compliment so far as to receive that cheapest of all presents—advice, at my hands.

“Mother,” I said one day, when the important question of Rose’s *trousseau* was being discussed, “if you have no objection, I should like to give some of the fine linen to Marie Dumont to do. Ernest would take me there. Have you heard anything of her lately?”

“I believe Miss Lateward saw her, but I forget. I know there was something about

Lady Janet's having been very kind to her, but really it has all gone out of my head."

That evening my brother and I walked down the narrow alley where Marie lived. Ernest was indignant at my bringing him to such a place, and disgusted at the cabbage-stalks and bones on the door-steps, and other less savoury odours. We mounted four pair of dirty stairs, my brother growling all the way up, like a fine young mastiff-gentleman of sixteen as he was. I knocked, and Marie opened the door herself. She gave a cry of delight, seized my hands, kissed them, and began, with French volubility, pouring forth her gratitude for the visit, when she caught my brother's face behind my shoulder. She started and turned pale.

"Who is that?—who is that with you?" Her gaze seemed fascinated.

"My brother. Why?"

"Strange!" she muttered, as she drew me in, and presented me a chair. "Pardon, monsieur, walk in, pray." From time to time during our visit she glanced uneasily and furtively at him, but generally seemed to avoid looking that way, as though it distracted her attention from what she was

saying. And she had a great *deal* to say about the English lady who had been so kind to her in consequence of that excellent young gentleman's recommendation; how she had given her large commissions of work, and had put her boy to a day-school, and had even asked her how she should like to go to England, and said she could get her plenty of employment there in teaching *broderie* and French—for (I forget if I have before mentioned that) Marie's French was particularly pure and good. That good lady had left her some work, and had promised Marie should hear from her further in England.

"I am glad to find you have been doing so well, Marie. And how is the child? I suppose he is at his day-school?"

She dragged him forwards from behind a chair, where he was playing with a kitten—a noble-looking boy, with bright, glossy hair, and the rosy hue of health on his well-washed cheeks. But suddenly, as I looked at him, I caught an expression in his eyes that had never struck me before, so like—No, no; that was imagination—but it made me shiver.

"Is he good? Does he give you no trouble?"

"S'il est sage? Oh! c'est un ange!" and she impressed a resonant kiss on his head.

"Tenez, si le bon Dieu en a beaucoup comme lui, il doit être content!"

"Have you time to do any more work, Marie, or are your hands full? My sister is to be married in three weeks, and these collars and chemisettes *must* be finished before that time, if you undertake them. Perhaps Lady Janet's work has to be done also by a certain time; if so——"

"Ça ne presse pas. Vous pouvez compter sur moi, mademoiselle." And she took them with a confident smile, promising to bring the work home, as I should be too busy to send or come again.

The next fortnight was a very busy one. I had no time to think of Marie; for every arrangement devolved upon me, and, to add to the bustle, a few days before the wedding Sir Charles Murray arrived. He was a fine old constitutional gentleman, with the old constitutional blue coat and gilt buttons, and the constitutional touch of gout every year; with a rheumy eye, a cheek like a winter-

apple, and a hearty voice. He had not been in Paris for five-and-twenty years, from which epoch he dated every event. "When I was in Paris at the time of the Peace," &c.; or, "I remember so and so, for it was not very long after I returned from Paris, at the time of the Peace," &c.

He and my mother talked a good deal over past days, and he secretly confided to me that, beautiful as he found his future daughter-in-law, she was not equal to her mother, as he remembered her, in the days when she was the toast of the county.

"I was very sweet upon her in those days, but I was a younger son—though a good bit older than her—and a poor country squire wouldn't ha' done for her. Jove! she used to make us young fellows mad, when she came to our county assemblies, and danced all night with fine London sparks—guardsmen, and lords, and so on—and wouldn't look at us. How time does fly, Miss Margaret! It's near thirty years ago; for, after that, I came over here with my father—at the time of the Peace—and then poor Jack, my eldest brother, died, and in

course of time I married, and have never seen your mother since."

"Charlie's, then, is a sort of inherited admiration?—the sins of the fathers visited on the children! No wonder at his falling in love at first sight, as he says he did. It really wasn't fair. The infatuation was in his blood, poor fellow!"

Sir Charles chuckled.

"Lord bless you! they're a cold set of young dogs now—a different sort to what they were in *my* day. Look at Charlie, there, sitting as demure by the side of his sweetheart as if she were an old 'oman o' seventy! *I* shouldn't ha' sat so when *I* was two-and-twenty."

It was the night before the wedding that Sir Charles delivered himself of the above sentiments. They were all sitting by the open windows, I remember, and I kept running in and out, devoting myself as much as I could to the old gentleman, for I found that he and my father did not get on too well together. Sir Charles was exceedingly shrewd. He knew the sort of man my father was, by report, and I have no doubt

he warned his son, even before there was any idea of an engagement with Rose, to be prepared against attempts to borrow money. Whatever may have passed between them, certain it is that my father was very much disappointed, and he always spoke of Sir Charles as "mean and close-fisted." In vain I represented that few fathers would welcome as kindly as Sir Charles a daughter-in-law who came to him in the same state as she entered the world—save the clothes on her back. My father refused to take any other view of Sir Charles's conduct, and the intercourse between them was not of the most cordial, in consequence. So I had enough to do in keeping up the ball of conversation (a soft, elastic one, that could hurt no one), being called out of the room fifty times in the course of the hour; for, like Martha, my mind was troubled about many things. There was the packing of the boxes, and the preparations for the breakfast; the cards and the carriages; tradesmen bringing home forgotten orders at the eleventh hour; ridiculous little notes from the merest acquaintances, requiring answers; lastly, a sharp

skirmish between Betsy and Rose's new maid, in which I had to act as peace-maker. What an evening of confusion it was! And there sat Rose herself, smiling alternately at Charles and at his father, as she sewed on the tassels to a purse she had been knitting for the latter. How clearly every little incident of that July evening returns to me!

And I linger over them, reader, for very loathness to approach a certain short passage in my life's story to which I am rapidly coming. But it must be done. I know I cannot give any faithful picture of that life's subsequent journey—its weary desert-stages, toilsome ascents, and pleasant garden-halts, without passing boldly across this dark and narrow bridge.

CHAPTER II.

I WAS putting the last dresses into my sister's boxes late that night, when Betsy suddenly exclaimed,

"O Lor', Miss Rita, why if we ain't bin and forgot all about the collars and things as that Frenchwoman were to have brung home. What *hever* are we to do?"

"How provoking. It can't be helped now. It's too late to send, and there's no one, I'm sure, we can spare in the morning. Perhaps she'll bring them; fortunately there are plenty here. It is very tiresome of her—she promised so faithfully, too!"

It was long past midnight before we were in bed; but all the bridal party were dressed and ready the following morning by ten o'clock. It was a full-blown, cloudless day at the end of July—one of the hottest in the

year: the windows open, and green shutters close; the atmosphere of the house heavy with the scent of flowers, which no breath of air stirred. Our beautiful Rose stands there, in a mist of tulle and orange-blossom, perfectly calm and collected. Why not? Before her all is sunshine—behind her gloom. She has no doubts or regrets—a few natural tears, perhaps, at leaving us all—nothing more.

We had read over the marriage-service together, at my earnest request, very early that morning. I sought to impress on her the solemn nature of the compact she was about to enter into, and my own view of a woman's obligations in matrimony. I ended by saying, "And therefore, dear Rose, I would sooner beg my bread than be married to a man I could not '*love, honour, and obey.*' Not all the rank and the riches—not all the persuasion in the world, shall tempt me to do this. You have been so fortunate, darling, as to meet with a companion and protector for whom you can really feel thus, at the very outset of your life. Few *are* so fortunate; never be ungrateful for this—never trifle with the happiness which is yours

to-day, but cherish it, try and keep it fresh and unspoiled through life."

"Oh yes, dear, of course: and you'll be as happy as I am very soon, I know. A certain person, who I'm sure adores you, will return, and it will be all right, and then you'll come to England. *Happier* than I am you can't be—it's impossible. Charles is such a darling! and I can say anything to him I like, and he doesn't think it nonsense. I never felt that about anybody before, except mamma, and I'm sure I never, never could love any one as I do Charles."

I liked to hear her reiterate the assurance of her entire love and confidence in him. I knew that she was not capable of the strong life-and-death attachment of more passionate natures; I knew that had Charles died, or the marriage from some cause been broken off, her weak, affectionate heart would have clung and bound round something else in a year or two: but I liked to hear her declare her belief in the unalterable, immortal nature of her love; and she would be a tender, good little wife, I knew.

There was a large assemblage of persons in the British Embassy chapel, for whom we

none of us cared, but who were asked, as being the only members of the *beau monde* left in Paris at that season. I stood near my sister, and once again, as I listened to those impressive words, I breathed a secret vow that never would I stand before God's altar, as a bride, but when I could make those solemn responses with my whole heart and soul.

The wedding and the breakfast passed off much as those things usually do. My father and Sir Charles each made a speech, which they had constructed on the regular conventional models. My father said, with effusion, that sad as the parting with his daughter was, he was consoled in remembering into what excellent hands he gave her; that she had always been perfect in her conduct as a daughter, and that he doubted not that she would prove so in every other relation of life: finally, that he begged to congratulate the man whose wife she became. Sir Charles observed that, coming of such parents, it was impossible to doubt the amiable character of the lady whom he had the happiness to call his daughter that day: his excellent friend Colonel Percival's acquaintance he had only

lately had the happiness of making, but Mrs. Percival he had long known; and he could only say, that if her daughter but emulated the admirable example she had always had before her, &c. &c. &c.

My mother did not cry, as I expected. She looked flushed, and so handsome in her grey dress, with its soft white lace, that I heard several people say she might be taken for our elder sister. When Rose retired to change her dress, we accompanied her, and even then my mother did not give way. She seemed sustained by the strong excitement to exertion as long as the necessity for it lasted.

And now the carriage with the white-favoured postilions is at the door; the last package has been carried down stairs; the maid is already in the rumble. Rose, with a few tears on her cheeks, kisses us all round two or three times, then passes through the drawing-room, shaking hands with those who are near her, and hurries down stairs, leaning on my father's arm. Charles and the old baronet follow.

"God bless 'ee, Charlie, my boy!" cries the latter; "write to me from Geneva, and

let me hear how you are getting on. Confounded dull place, unless it's changed since I was there, with your mother, in '15, when we toured it, after the Peace. Confounded dull work, travelling. I advise you to come home soon. God bless 'ee, both !”

He wrings his son's hand through the carriage window, and now the young couple are off. We all crowd on the balcony, and kiss our hands: a little white glove waves in answer. Betsy rushes forth, and, to the astonishment of the Parisian mob, flings an old satin shoe after the carriage as it whirls away, and a great cloud of dust receives it out of our sight.

They are to spend the remainder of that summer and autumn in Switzerland, and the winter in Italy. They will pass through Paris on their way home in the spring, when Mrs. Charles Murray will be presented “on her marriage.” I hear people talking of these things as they stand in the balcony, or hover in knots about the room, spinning the light gossamer-web of small-talk—but I seem as one in a dream. I look towards my mother, who has borne up bravely hitherto, and I observe that she begins to

grow pale, and her face has a weary, worn expression about it. How I wish all these people were gone ! but they are beginning only slowly to disperse. It is desperate work keeping up an appearance of liveliness now.

I seat myself at the window at last, feeling incapable of further exertion. Two or three men only remain, and they are talking about the Chantilly races with my father and Sir Charles, so I can be quiet. I recal the engraving of Newton's "Bridesmaid," and fancy I feel much as she may have done. But this is not a time for vain regrets: I have enough to do in the "living present." Nay, a moment of action is even now at hand. I get up to attend to my mother, whom I can see in the perspective of the second room, stretched, completely exhausted, on her sofa, when I am stopped by a servant.

"There is a person outside who wishes to speak with you, mademoiselle."

"What sort of person?"

"A woman."

"It must be Marie Dumont;" and upon

the staircase outside our door I found her indeed, but looking more as I first knew her—pale and very worn.

“Come in, Marie; why do you stand there?”

“Oh, mademoiselle, forgive me! I dare not come in. The child has been very ill, and that is why I was not able to do the work in time. I could not bear you to think——”

“I understand. Well, never mind; it can’t be helped. How is the child?”

“Dieu soit béni! he is well now. I thought the bon Dieu would have taken him. For four nights I never left his cradle.”

“You look ill yourself—you must take care. What was the matter with him?”

“Small-pox, mademoiselle.”

I shrank back, involuntarily, with horror. “Good Heavens, Marie! what could make you think of coming here, then? You don’t know how easily infection is brought.”

“Dear mademoiselle, the doctor said there was no danger whatever. The house is well purified, none of the lodgers have

caught it, and I wanted so much to tell you how it was the things were not done. I would not go *in*, however, and here——”

“ Well, at all events I cannot stay talking to you. My father and mother have both a peculiar horror of the disease.”

But even as I speak, the sound of voices in loud and laughing discourse come nearer and nearer through the doors. The stair-landing where we stand is dark, and hearing the voices approach, I draw aside to let them pass, when suddenly I feel myself seized by an iron, icy grasp. Marie, her eyes dilated, her face livid, distorted, drags me yet further back—back into the shadow of an alcove. I have no power of resistance; my breath seems suddenly suspended, while she crushes me against the wall. And as she stands there quivering under some violent emotion, the owners of those merry voices appear, and seeing me apparently engaged in earnest conversation, pass on down stairs.

“ Who—who is that ? How comes he here ?” she gasps out.

“ What do you mean ? Don’t hold me in that manner, Marie.”

“For the love of God, *what* is that man’s real name?”

“Who?—which do you mean?”

“The last speaker—there—he who is showing the way—that tall, fair man.”

“That? Why, that is my father.”

“Father!” she shrieked, and threw her arms wildly up. A glimmering of the horrid truth flashed on me.

“*He is my Edouard Brown. He is the fa——*” A burst of hysterical sobs choked her utterance, and she sank in a heap on the stairs.

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CHAPTER III.

I DRAW a veil over the rest of that scene. What I then felt, you can guess, reader, better than I can tell. You have never known, happily, the bitterness of such an hour, but you can imagine something like the revulsion it created in my whole being. I got the poor creature away somehow—I hardly knew how myself. I felt giddy and stunned. I could no more have shed tears than I could have talked over the hideous secret that lay festering at my breast; and I had a sickening dread of meeting my poor, miserable mother. Long afterwards, the recollection of that dread came back to me, as one of those mysterious forebodings that Providence gives us all some time or other in our lives.

At length Betsy came to say my mother had gone to bed, feeling unwell.

All that evening, and far into the night, I was in close attendance on her. She was feverish, with a headache and frequent sickness, and lay tossing and moaning there, unable to get any rest. Oh! that long, sultry night! when the orange-trees on the balcony never stirred a leaf, and the moon shone full into the room through the open window, carving black stone-shadows all about, like those that lay so heavy at my heart! There I sat at the foot of the bed, bathing her face now and then with vinegar, or trying, with a feather fan, to bring a little air about her. Towards morning—it might be two or three o'clock—Betsy insisted on relieving watch, that I might go to bed. I was indeed worn out, and thought if I could sleep for a few hours I should be better fitted to meet the to-morrow, and whatever it might bring. But sleep would not come; perhaps from over-exhaustion—perhaps from the striving and longing after its peaceful oblivion. The birds began to sing, and clocks struck the wakening hours: sounds of life made themselves heard through the

great city. It was useless: I rose and dressed myself. My mother was no better; and all that day she remained much in the same state. The next, my father and Ernest were to leave us, which was an inexpressible relief to me. But in the morning my mother was so ill, that, after sending for the doctor, I mustered courage to tell my father that I thought he *ought* to stay (it was a bitter draught for me!), and that the parting from Ernest would, I feared, have a terrible effect on my mother in her weak state. I was told that the vessel in which my brother's passage to India was taken sailed on a certain day, and that "the least he could have in London was three days, and the idea of his losing his passage-money, on account of his mother's headaches," was quite ridiculous.

So spake our father: but the tears gathered in Ernest's eyes, though he tried to conceal what he felt.

"God bless you, dear boy," whispered my mother, raising herself up in bed with a great effort, and folding her arms around him. "We shall never see each other again, but you'll be good, and steady, and all that

sort of thing, won't you, dear, for the sake of poor mamma? and you'll wear this piece of hair round your neck, and think of her sometimes, when you're getting into any mischief." And so they parted, to meet in this world no more.

That same evening, when the doctor had seen his patient, he drew me aside with a grave, hesitating air, and paused, as he fingered the seals on his watch-chain, before he spoke.

"I am afraid—I am rather afraid, young lady, we have some awkward symptoms this evening. I can't say positively, but I think, all things considered, it would be safer for you to remove to some friend's house, and send for a nurse—a *sœur de charité*, for instance—to attend on your mamma."

"What *do* you mean, doctor? I don't understand. You surely don't suppose I should leave my mother? What is it you are afraid of?"

"Why, I cannot say positively—not *decidedly*—till to-morrow; but, judging from certain symptoms, you see, I should think it safer, for *fear* of infection——"

"Infection? What of?"

“Small-pox.”

I trembled, and turned even paler than I was, I suppose, for Dr. T. hastened to add,

“I see you are alarmed, and you had much better take my advice, for nothing disposes so much for infection as fear.”

“Do you think it was for myself?” I said, scornfully.

O strange, mysterious dispensation! God only knows whether I was really the medium through which the impalpable poison had been transmitted from that wretched woman, or whether it was seminated in the hot, stagnant atmosphere of the great city. But it was too true. If Dr. T. had any doubts, they were dispelled the following day. It was a confirmed and virulent case. I need not say that I never, for one instant, thought of leaving her, though strongly urged to do so by Betsy, and, last of all, by my poor mother herself. Indeed, I know not where I could have gone, had I been so disposed. I had no friends among the mammon of unrighteousness, who would have “received me into their houses.” At all events, I never put them to the severe test. My duty was plain: to remain by my mother’s

bedside as long as strength was given me : if stricken by the hand of that sickness, I should, at least, have the consolation of having done what was right. I cannot deny that I *had* an invincible loathing of the disease, but now that I came into personal contact with this raging demon, whose ravages in some painfully disfigured face had so often made me turn away with disgust, a fortitude and fearlessness were given me I dared hardly expect. I never left the sick-room : I snatched a few minutes' sleep when I could, Betsy and a *sœur de charité* taking their watch, then, in turns. Thus passed nine anxious, weary days, fluctuating from hope to fear, and fear to hope. I wrote to my father, and his answer was much what I expected. He said it was "a fortunate thing Ernest did not remain after all, as he might have caught that confounded complaint:" that he had "just returned from Southampton, after seeing him off in the *Ganges*—a capital steamer"—that London was already very empty, and he thought of going down for a week to Cowes, as of course he shouldn't return home until all danger of infection was over, as he could

be of no use. He was really very sorry ; it was a great bore : and he begged I would see that the house was properly purified before he came back.

Purified before he came back. Hideous mockery ! And she lying between life and death the while—all alike to her, now, tenderness or neglect.

Then my impious heart cried aloud in its bitterness, daring to question the decrees of the All-Wise.

“ Father ! if there be retributive justice on earth, why is *she*, patient-hearted, sinned against, the victim of this loathsome disease, and not *you* ? ”

In the delirium of fever my mother's mind recurred, as it had done once before, to other days and scenes. She was quite unconscious of our presence, and often rambled on the whole night, so that it was exhausting even to sit by and listen. On the ninth day the fever abated ; she became calmer ; her breathing less oppressed ; and she knew us—my faithful Betsy and me. My heart grew light in the belief that the danger was now over.

“ If she have but strength to rally,” said

the doctor that night, "she is safe. Unfortunately, we have to contend with a constitutional malady as well, that has been weakening her for years."

But I would listen to nothing but my own hopes, and so five more days slipped by, and I wrote to my father that all danger of *infection* was over—that my mother was only now left very prostrate after her severe illness, but that if she could be strengthened sufficiently to be moved somewhere, I thought change of air would soon set her up.

It was the evening of the 10th of August. My mother had been sleeping, or at least lying so tranquilly for many hours, and I felt so much easier about her, that I had ventured out for the first time to get a little fresh air. On my return she was awake, and made me come and sit close to her pillow. It was then twilight, but I could still distinguish her face plainly.

"Give me that small leather-case, Betsy, and you needn't stay. You must be worn out. Go and rest yourself. Miss Rita will remain with me.—My dear, now we are alone, I have so many things I wish to say, I hardly know how to begin. Whether

I shall have time to tell you all, I think you ought to know—before——My child, you know something of what my life has been. I forgive him from my heart, dear: tell him so when I am gone. I hope I am not wrong in speaking to you about him: I wish to do what is best. You will be left alone, *quite* alone with him, when I am gone. You are wiser, dear, and have a stronger head than I——Well, never mind. What I wanted to tell you refers to the past—for her sake who is gone, and also as a warning.

“These are all your aunt Mary’s letters—some written before I was married—and some of your father’s. You never knew that he was once engaged to be married to her? She was very much attached to him: but she herself broke it off, from his inveterate habit of gambling. Nothing could cure him. He promised, but was always induced to play again. It cost her a great deal to give him up, but she did so. She was very young then, and was never the same afterwards. I was a child and at school, and knew nothing of it. Three years afterwards, when Mary found

he was paying me attention—I was just come out, and Mary didn't go any longer into the world—she wrote up from the country, sending me these letters of his, and warning me against a confirmed gambler, entreating me not to think of him. She put her own feelings out of the question: it must have cost her a great deal to write this to me. I was a foolish young thing, and thought there was no harm in amusing myself with him, and never dreamt of anything serious. And a year or two passed, and still, whenever we met, he paid me the same attention, and still we heard that he gambled; but I found, notwithstanding, that I thought oftener of him than of any one else. At last, in spite of all my sister's entreaties, I was selfish, and blind enough to accept him. Oh! Mary, not even *you* knew half the trials I have since had—no one will ever know—but I considered it all the just punishment of my folly and ingratitude then—God forgive me!”

She laid her head back, exhausted with the exertion of talking so much. I moistened her lips with some grapes, and then sat down, holding her emaciated hand in mine,

my heart too full for words. Presently she raised her head again. I made a sign to her to lie down and not speak, but she shook her head.

"I had ~~been~~ married but a very little while before I discovered that my husband did not care for me. That was my first trial—perhaps my bitterest. God knows why he had married me. I was handsome and run after—it's all one now, I can talk of it—and perhaps it was pique, for it was *she*, and she only, Mary, he really loved—as much as he was able to love anything. Oh! he would have been a different man if he had married her, I think. She would have had an influence over him I never had. I was foolish—weak. Rita, when you marry, make your husband respect you. Sometimes, since I have been ill, the thought has come over me that I was terribly, wickedly the cause of——O God forgive me! He knows I had much to suffer."

She stopped, gasping for breath; a sharp spasm crossed her face, and her thin hand trembled convulsively in mine.

"Mother, dearest mother, do not agitate yourself in this way—pray do not. Leave

the rest of what you wish to say till the morning. Your mind is unnaturally excited now; do not talk any more. I will remain by you all night, only try and sleep now, and when you wake——”

“I must finish what I have to say while I can. Your aunt, after some years, Rita, married Sir Nicholas Dacre. She had a great respect and admiration for her husband; I don't think it was exactly love, but she mourned for him, when he died, as her best friend. And meantime our difficulties began, and got worse and worse, until at last—oh! it was very hard and humbling in my position—I applied to Mary for assistance. I would sooner have done anything else than *that*. Your father made me.”

If my mother could distinguish my face at that moment, she must have seen a strange expression there. I thought my father could not sink lower in my eyes: there was yet another step, I found. How he, with all his false pride, situated so strangely, as I now learnt, with regard to my aunt—how he could have brought himself to beg of her, was more than I could comprehend. Even at that hour, in a tu-

mult of conflicting emotions, I remember my blood boiling with indignation in my veins—it seemed too unnatural to be *possible*. It seems so still, when I think of it at this distance of time.

“It was a system of constant borrowing after that,” my mother continued. “Your father was always getting into fresh trouble, alas!—promising and breaking his word—the old story. I needn’t tell you, dear, that Mary did all she could to reclaim him: she saw Jews and lawyers, and settled all his affairs twice, besides all she had given him before to pay his debts of honour—that was when she was here. And at last she saw it was of no use, and she determined to do no more; she said the money had better be spent in educating you all, and that is why she left her money—you understand—any legacy or annuity to *me*, he would have had power over.” Her voice was growing very faint, but still she went on. “Now I have told you all. Do you know why? Because, dear, you will have to resist your father, I’m afraid, in many ways, when I’m gone, and it’s better you should be prepared, and know that his love of gambling is so

great, nothing will restrain him. As a young man, he sacrificed the only woman he ever loved for it; as a married one, he has sacrificed his wife and children. He will try to get hold of your little annuity. You must resist it; and watch, too, over the interests of your brothers. You must be a mother to my poor boys, Rita. And I know he will try and persuade you into marrying some one for his money. Don't do it, dear. I was thinking that by-and-by, perhaps, you might go and live with Rose and her husband—not that I would have you desert *him*, if he will really be a father to you; only——”

She broke off, as though her thoughts were in too painful a train even for words, and when she spoke again, her manner was very calm and solemn.

“I think God will not let you come to harm, dearest Rita—if you ask Him. My own trials, perhaps, would have been lighter, if I had ‘laid all my care upon Him.’ Ain't those the words? Read me that chapter. I thought too little about religion, but God is merciful. I believe *that* from the bottom of my heart.”

I lit a candle, and took down the Bible and Prayer-book from the shelf. I thought it would tranquillise her mind, and at all events prevent her talking, to read her something; but of the comfort of the Scriptures I practically knew nothing. I was ignorant where the chapter she asked for was to be found; so I looked for the Evening Psalms of the day. I could hardly steady my voice sufficiently to begin: and when I came to that beautiful Fifty-fifth Psalm—I do not know that I had ever read it before—its applicability to the occasion almost overpowered me. It seemed as though the voice of Conscience sighed, “My heart is disquieted within me, and the fear of death is fallen upon me,” the wayworn spirit struggling to be free, and exclaiming, “Oh that I had wings like a dove, for then would I flee away, and be at rest. Lo, then would I get me away far off, and remain in the wilderness. I would make haste to escape, because of the stormy wind and tempest.” But when I came to the words, “For it is not an enemy who hath done me this dishonour, for then I could have borne it; neither was it mine adversary that did magnify himself against me, for then, perad-

venture, I would have hid myself from him : *But it was even thou, my companion, my guide, and mine own familiar friend,*"—I felt a strange thrill through me. The song of the Hebrew Shepherd-king, plaining away, thousands of years ago, seemed the direct echo of our own actual trouble.

After I had done, she repeated softly the words, "Oh cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall nourish thee." Then she fell into a fitful, uneasy dose, and I stole from the room on tiptoe. I could not, would not allow myself to believe there was *danger* ; but yet——Let a message be taken to the clergyman, requesting him to come as early as he can in the morning. Half an hour afterwards Dr. T. stood with me by the bed.

"There has been too much excitement here. I am sorry to tell you I find her much less well than I did this morning. She *may*, with sleep and perfect quiet——"

I hid my face in my hands. I gave up hope from that moment.

"The action of the heart is so very feeble. I am inclined to think there must be some strong mental excitement, too, the brain is still

so irritated—it is working too much for the body. I confess, the case begins to look very serious. Still, if you can keep your mamma *perfectly* tranquil for some hours——”

“Tell me the truth; I had rather. Don’t deceive me. Is there any hope?”

He said, in the low, professional voice, “I am afraid, very little.”

The nights that had preceded it were as nothing compared to this. My faculties, I thank God, were not paralysed: I was able to think of, and do all that was necessary or possible to be done, but I was no longer sustained by any hope, and I felt that I never had loved my mother so much as now I was about to lose her. That last confidence and appeal, in disclosing to me how much she had loved, and struggled, and suffered, had drawn me closer to her than I had been in all these years. Strange, how little we often know of those who are next us in the battle-ranks through this long march of life! Sometimes, at the end of the day—sometimes earlier, should the heavy breast-plates of custom be displaced by accident—we are amazed to find the warm, sensitive heart, or, it may be, the ghastly wound that

has lain hidden from us until then. I knew my mother better now. The earth-cloud that dimmed so much that was true and tender was removed. My heart smote me in a thousand little things. I thought how I might have been more her companion while she was yet with us, and accused myself of not having loved her as I ought.

I opened the window, and put back the curtain. My mother was awake now. She turned her hot, weary head towards it, and I could see her eyes fixed thirstily upon the blue vault of heaven—she was longing for the eternal peace that was beyond that deep, pure sky. And as I looked into the heart of the night, and thought of my desolate position here when she was gone, I murmured again with the Psalmist, “Oh that I had wings like a dove, for then would I flee away, and be at rest.”

With the first glimmer of morning I observed that a change had come over her face. She seemed to wish to say something, and motioned that I should lower my head to her lips. She had not once alluded to my father's absence, or expressed a wish for his return. Now she said,

“I have hoped so to see him once more, that I might charge him—with my dying words—to redeem the past—to amend his life—to be a father to his children, as he hopes to have mercy from our Father—hereafter. Tell him so—tell him I forgave him from my heart—and that I died happy, trusting in the mercy of God—to whose care I commend my children——”

At five o'clock the clergyman came, and administered the Sacrament. I know her heart joined fervently in the responses, though her lips moved but feebly, and gave forth no sound. Her cold hand lay in mine, and her face was towards that glorious sun that was breaking in the eastern sky.

* * * *

Three hours later, I stood with tearless eyes gazing at her as she lay there, beautiful again in the holy serenity of death. I had folded her hands—those perfect hands—meekly on her breast, and placed some white roses in them. The servants were all gone out, on one sad errand or another: I was alone in the apartment. There was a ring at the bell; then another louder than the first. I thought I heard the door opened as if with a

latch-key, and a heavy step coming through the rooms. I had been arranging with my own dead-cold hands the linen shroud: I drew it hastily over the face, and went towards the door.

It was thrown open suddenly. My father, covered with dust, stood before me.

“Curse those servants. I’ve been ringing for an hour. What does it mean? By G—d, Rita, I’ll have them all——Why what’s the matter? Where—*where* is your mother?”

I drew back the shroud. “There she lies—at rest, and beyond this world’s cruel wrongs.”

CHAPTER IV.

THERE are periodical changes in the moral as in the physical system. If we look honestly within ourselves, and then recal what we were a very few years back (and since we came to man's and woman's estate), we see how differently we then thought and felt. The change may be for the better, or for worse. The mind, like its material companion, may generate some hidden disease, the germs of which have until now lain hidden ; or it may outgrow the feebleness of youth, become less susceptible to the wind and frost, and strike forth unexpected shoots, full of sap and vigour. But we all undergo these revolutions, variously produced in various minds. With some, the reading of a book is sufficient. It sets their thoughts working in a certain train, with good or bad

results, as the autobiography of more than one criminal tells. Other less impressionable natures require some strong shock to set the languid pulses of their being astir in a new direction. And there are some who sigh with Romeo, "Dry sorrow drinks our blood," on whom the years have told, by quenching the sacred fire on their young heart's altar. The light of their lives went out suddenly, and no one knew it—not even their best friends!

Some such change as this now took place in me. All I had learnt and suffered during the past few months made me feel prematurely old. The bloom—the elasticity of youth—were gone, never to return. My childhood had not, perhaps, been very happy; but *then*, my pleasures were so little dependent on others, that my girl's spirit had burned on brightly enough—ambition and enthusiasm undimmed. I possessed that keen sense of enjoyment, impalpable and evanescent as the scent of a flower, which a picture, or a pleasant book—nay, sunshine alone—brought with it, and which no one could take from me. A season had intervened since then, in which I had gone

out of myself, as it were. The world's smile had dazzled me until I had nearly become one of its frivolous dependents for life. And now I had returned again to the old silent companionship of my own thoughts. The chamber was the same, but dark and cold: the embers only remained of the fire that once warmed it.

The first days of heavy mourning were over. The autumn, which had set in wet and rainy, was succeeded by sharp winter weather. I have little to tell of my outward life during these months; the history of every day would be but the history of my own mind. I lived entirely alone. My father, to do him justice, showed a respect for my mother's memory, and for my grief, which left me as much to myself as I could desire. After the shock—which he felt in a certain way—was over, and two or three weeks had passed, he was out again just as much as ever. I expected, of course, nothing else. Our lives were as distinct and apart, now that we were left alone together out of the large family circle, as when I was a little child shut into the nursery all day long. We lived under the same roof,

and that was all. We had nothing in common. My father had never allowed me to love or respect him, and all that had lately come to my knowledge had increased the distance between us fourfold. Still, I never forgot my mother's dying injunctions. Had he shown the least disposition—the very faintest wish for my society—I would have stilled the bitter memories that cried aloud, and have gone to him. But he never did; and for many months my faithful Betsy was my only companion. I took long walks with her before breakfast; the rest of the day I remained in the house: I dreaded so much meeting any of the gay Paris world. People were very kind. Many were the offers to take me out driving, and other little attentions, from ladies whom I had done the injustice to think had already forgotten my existence. Even the tradesmen showed a consideration for my position, when any of the old money difficulties occurred, to which I was now, from long custom, inured. As to Monsieur Barac, there was no measure to the kind thoughts he had for me. He generally waylaid me on my return in the morning, now to press on me a pot of tulips for

my window—now to offer me a number of the “Magasin Pittoresque,” or the loan of some hazy little Van der Weldt, just imported from its native soil. For I returned to my old occupations, not with the old zest, indeed, but with the determination to give my mind so much hard work as should prevent its preying on itself. I bought an Italian grammar, and set to work to learn that language. Rose wrote that she found it very easy, which made me first think of learning; and I discovered that nothing occupies the mind more successfully for the time than the exercise of those faculties—not very high, perhaps, half-mechanical ones—necessary to acquire a language. Poor Rose! the sad news had reached her at Geneva, in the third week of her honeymoon. It was a terrible shock, coming in the midst of their first happiness; but I was glad they were travelling. Far better than remaining in one place, with nothing to distract the mind from the one sad subject. I heard from her constantly, and already her letters showed she had recovered her spirits. I dare say the constant and rapid change of scene made the weeks that had elapsed appear long and

many—to me it seemed but yesterday. In December, my little brothers were to come home. I looked forward to it longingly. It would be pleasant to hear their glad young voices about the house again.

I considered for a long time what I should do about that wretched woman and her child. I could not abandon her, poor creature, but I had an invincible repugnance to seeing her again. Through her I felt as if Death had entered our doors, and, placed in the painful position we were towards each other, personal interviews could only be distressing. I sent Betsy: she was the bearer of an old winter gown or two and some money, and had particular injunctions to find out how Marie and the child were faring. But they were gone, and no one could tell anything about them. The neighbours said she had left some weeks before: she had paid her rent, that was all the owners of the house knew or cared for: she had never associated much with them. So I had lost all clue to her, and henceforward she must go on her solitary path without such poor assistance as I could offer.

I have not yet mentioned a letter that I received from Miss Lateward just before my

mother's death. I could not open it for many days ; I did not answer it for weeks, though my thoughts often reverted to, and speculated on, its contents. It was followed by many kind and sympathetic ones when she learnt my loss, but I give this first letter because it presents a picture in detail, coloured by the writer's characteristic pencil, of the household in which she was now domesticated :

“ Rochford Court, near Ancaster, August 7.

“ MY DEAR MARGUERITE,—

“ In accordance with your amiable wish, I seat myself to narrate to you the progress of events since I arrived here. You received my epistle from the metropolis, I trust, giving you tidings of our safety, after encountering the perils of the *watery deep* ? In that epistle, I expressed my amazement at the intelligence of your sister's approaching nuptials : she is *full young* to assume the responsibilities of the conjugal yoke, and it is to be desired that her *education* were more complete, but from what you say of the gentleman, I trust it may prove a satisfactory alliance.

“ You will be happy to learn that my

position is *confirmed* as teacher in this highly respectable family. My pupil, Miss Violet Rochford, aged thirteen, is a young lady of docile disposition, with a taste for botany, and rather an *undue* predilection for equestrian exercise. In her mnemonic studies, I find her attention often wandering to a young female horse (filly is, I believe, the generic term) that is allowed to sport in the park under the schoolroom window. I have requested that its gambols may henceforth be confined to some more *distant* portion of the demesne. We have commenced to form an herbarium in our rural walks, and as Miss Rochford's attention has been arrested by the morphological point of view in which I teach her to regard plants, I am hopeful of thus combining *instruction* with *relaxation*. The country here is singularly devoid of timber; the aborigines, I apprehend, having consumed those vast tracts of forests of which we read as having extended throughout Great Britain. There is no *neighbourhood* (as it is ungrammatically termed,—meaning that there is but little visiting), and our daily existence is normal in character, with little interruption or variation. The place, you are aware, belongs to Mr. Rochford, but his

mother resides with him. Her benevolence is truly edifying: she is daily among the cottagers, by whom she is much feared and respected: indeed, she is, it is plain to see, a woman of very *strong mind*, possessing both *promptitude* and *firmness*. Mr. Rochford, who seems an amiable young man, has a great veneration for his mother, consults her on all occasions, and seldom decides a question without her sanction, I am told. He is an active magistrate, and often absent for some days at a time on county business. He takes a lively interest in his sister's mental development, and of an evening often reads aloud Shakspeare (a *family* Shakspeare, of course, with all objectionable passages omitted). Mrs. Rochford occasionally plays on the piano: she was a pupil of Clementi, and considered to have a fine touch for Handel, whom her son calls 'the Milton of music.' The other night she was so engaged, when a domestic entered to say that a child in the village was seized with the croup. A missive had been sent for the country Æsculapius, but he resides four miles off. Mrs. R. had on her waterproof cloak in a moment (for it was *raining hard*). A mustard plaster and some hot preparation were procured

without loss of time from the housekeeper, and with these in her basket she set out, her son holding an *umbrella* over her! I mention this little anecdote as illustrating Mrs. R.'s *energy* and active benevolence. Yet I think I perceive (though she has been most *kind* to me, I must say) that she has no ordinary degree of pride. For instance, yesterday, at luncheon, I inquired the name of a lady whose portrait hangs over the sideboard—being struck, the fact is, with a certain degree of likeness to *you*! A cloud came over Mrs. R.'s brow, and she replied, rather shortly, 'that it was the Duchess of Portsmouth.' I most unreflectingly said, 'Oh! an ancestor, I suppose?' To which she rejoined, 'We have never had a disreputable character, not even a *king's mistress*, in our family, though Rochford Court has been in our possession four hundred years. My son picked up that picture somewhere for the sake of the face: I own I was annoyed at it.' (He was not present, fortunately, when this occurred.) I write all this, my dear Marguerite, because you are kind enough to say you wish to know every particular relative to the family in which I am living, and that you shall consider no amount of detail as *tedious*. Lady

Janet left this last week for Scotland. Her ladyship often did me the honour to inquire if I had heard from you, and when I read to her some passages of your letter, she appeared *deeply* interested, as did also Mrs. Rochford, who happened to be present. The latter has questioned me more than once concerning you, saying that, from what she had heard, she feared you must be too original and *peculiar* to be very happy. I believe my dear pupil deserves all I said of her——But how I am running on ! You will think that the garrulity of age has overtaken me. In the words of the blind bard, ‘ With thee conversing I forget all time ! ’

“ Believe me, with respectful compliments to Mrs. Percival, ever to be,

“ My dear Marguerite,

“ Your faithful friend,

“ TABITHA LATEWARD.”

I thought, when I read this letter, what a disagreeable woman Mrs. Rochford must be. How intensely I should dislike her, and how the poor must resent her impertinent interference in their affairs at all hours of the day and night. You will perceive I was angry. It must have been that touch about the pic-

ture,—though a flickering hope *did* arise, “Could he have bought it from its likeness to me?” But it was soon dispelled. He had never even mentioned my name. If he had ever spoken of me to his mother, it was only as “original and peculiar.” Well, well, it was a bubble, and it had burst. I had no right to expect anything else, and I ought to feel how unsuited our characters and habits of life were to each other.

Then I took up my journal and read the following entry, made some months before:

“Hubert Rochford said to-day, in reply to an observation of mine, that we should be all much better without our Spanish castles,—that day-dreaming never did any one any good. And yet, who would willingly have been without his? The man who never had any is truly a possessor of that wisdom which is akin to folly. Delusions are to our youth what mists are to the morning, beautiful in themselves, necessary and refreshing to our human nature, but gradually melting before the strong rays of the world, or if you like it better, the sun of knowledge. Natures, like countries, where that sun shines too hotly from early morning, are never very fertile.

The longer we can keep our hearts fresh and untouched by it, the better."

I had had *my* delusions : they had not lasted long, and they were gone !

You may believe that I often thought over this letter in my solitary hours. How different that life must be to anything I had ever known or conceived ? It sounded dull enough, certainly, that barren country, with Handel and the herbarium for recreations ; but then my heart said there was the pervading principle in such an existence, for ever sweetening and elevating it above a life of mere social pleasures, however refined and intellectual. Yes, and I knew, too, that I could have lived thus with *one* companion (no matter *who*, for had I not driven that phantom of a passion down to the tomb of the Capulets ?), nor coveted aught, from year's end to year's end, but to be one with him, to share his joys and sorrows, his schemes and aspirations, to sit down with him in the cheerful firelight of "home," and work out the great problem of our lives in unison.

Reader, I was very lonely all those months ; lonely and desolate at heart, which

is a far different thing from the solitude of the eyes and tongue. The latter, in my case, was voluntary ; but though I employed my thoughts as much as possible in other ways, there were times when they dwelt gloomily and despondingly on the future. I was far, very far, from having learnt, in all my troubles, that Christian conviction, that God ordereth all things for the best, which I hope I now feel. My wild, impatient heart no longer, indeed, throbbed as it once had done ; but it was the heaviness of the stone rolled on the door of the sepulchre, not God's angel of calmness setting within.

It was in November, I think, that I first began to feel uneasy again about my father, from a very unusual symptom in his affairs—a profusion of ready money. Three or four times, when I applied to him to pay the house-bills (and had prepared myself for the old evasions, nay, for a direct retort that I might advance the money from my own annuity), he had given it me directly. I knew at the time of my poor mother's funeral he had hardly enough to pay for that and the doctor's expenses. Where had the money since come from ? The oftener I thought of it,

the more I was afraid he had been again to the Jews.

One morning, about this time, as I was returning home, I saw Felicien Ismael standing at the door of old Barac's apartment. He had been waiting for me evidently, for, as I approached, he came forward with an obsequious bow, while Barac retired into a distant room.

"Pon chour, mademoiselle. I am proud af de chance dat make me for to zee you. Will you accord me five minutes' entertain, ma ponne demoiselle?"

He motioned with his hand to signify that Monsieur Barac's apartment would be a better theatre for the interview. I thanked him; I would listen to what he had to say there.

"Var gut. You not forget dat I had vonce de plaisir you a petite service to render?—a mere pagatelle, c'est vrai."

"I remember your kindness perfectly, Monsieur Ismael. Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"Dere is, my dear mees—a trifle—qui ne fous coûtera rien."

"What is it? If I can, I shall be glad."

"Dere is one var fine artist af my acquaint, who ambitions to produce a picshur af de Sainte Vierge getting up de clouds. He want a model for she."

"Well, Monsieur Ismael, and what then?"

"He desire ardently that you would pose to him. Pauvre diable! his fortune is made, ven you so gut are."

"What in the world do you mean, Monsieur Ismael?"

"Mein Gott, it is clear, mademoiselle. He zee in you de true picshur af de Sainte Vierge, and——"

"Nonsense, Monsieur Ismael. You must think me very vain, to make such an extraordinary proposition to me. This is not your friend's only object, I presume: he can find hundreds of models infinitely better suited to his purpose. There must be some other reason for his wishing me to sit to him. What is it? and what is your interest in the business?"

"My gut mees, I am open as de heaven! I selbst puy de picshur. I make my honest profit on him."

"Well. That is not all? You buy the picture—and then?"

"He go trough my hand. I von day find a puyer for him, if I have de gut luck."

"Perhaps you have *already* found one?"

"It hangs on you, mademoiselle," said Ismael, dropping an additional infusion of oil into the hinges of his discourse.

"I think I begin to understand," I replied. "There is some one you imagine will buy this picture from—from—in short, from its likeness to me?"

The Jew smiled an unctuous smile, and rubbed his jewelled fingers, half in perplexity as to how much he should reveal.

"Hé bien, oui, ma ponne demoiselle. Dere is one var great church puilt in de provinces—where one patron of mine—one var gut friend—is de *grand seigneur*. Man seeks now de altar-piece—and I know de fancy of dis great gut gentleman, dat when he zee——"

"Enough! I don't wish to hear who the *grand seigneur* is, or anything more. I can lend myself to nothing of the sort. I have let you go on so far, for I was curious, I own, to unravel the mystery. I am sorry and surprised, Monsieur Ismael, that you should ever have asked me to do this."

“De gut Colonel, your pappa, make no difficulties. *Il m'a même dit de fous en parler.*”

I could hardly contain my indignation, but said, as quietly as I could, “I am afraid you see too much of my father, Monsieur Ismael. We will talk no more about this foolish business, if you please; but I wanted to speak to you—to implore you not to advance my father any more money. *You* know the difficulty of his repaying it: what security you have, I cannot imagine.”

“I haf not done buishnesh vid your gut pappa, I gif my vord, for var long time. Perhapsh I guesh where he find de monish. Perhapsh, who knowsh?” he added, with a grin, “some soon day you vill be kinder disposhed to gif my gut patron, de Marquis de pleasure of your face.”

I thought this too impertinent to be answered, and, bowing coldly, I left him, and went up-stairs.

CHAPTER V.

AT Christmas the boys came home. My father had, at first, said they must spend their holidays at school. "It was great trouble and expense for six weeks." (I could not help smiling bitterly to hear him talk of expense—when it suited him.) I urged the point, however, so strongly, that he consented, and they came. They were good, tractable boys, very unlike Ernest in every way, and I found it easy to gain an ascendancy over them. I was maternal and authoritative as to their daily holiday-tasks; but, these over, they treated me as their friend and companion, to whom they told everything—their secret thoughts and school-time joys and troubles; above all, their separate ambitions for the future. Roger, the least clever of the two, had a strong pre-

dilection for the navy. He was always drawing ships and rigging a little boat he had, and solemnly declared he would never be anything but a sailor. What my father's views might be I knew not, but I saw no objection; on the contrary, it was the best thing for him to enter a profession early, make a path for himself, and be independent of every one. The wish of Arthur's heart—to be a clergyman—presented more difficulty of realisation. I turned over in my mind for some time how a college-education could be accomplished. I was afraid that the trustees of my aunt's will, who were rigid in its interpretation, might object to allow the legacy, due on his coming of age, to be forestalled in paying for the necessary expenses. As much of my small annuity as I could save should be devoted to this object; but it would, after all, amount to a trifling sum; and I could not but foresee the probabilities of my having some urgent, imperative call for these savings in the interim. There was nothing to be done, however, but to await the workings of time. Perhaps Rose might do something by-and-by for her favourite brother.

We walked early one morning, my brothers and I, to a certain pond near the Bois de Boulogne, that Roger might launch his boat. It was a mild, still winter's morning. There had been a long frost, and now it had been thawing for two days. The sky was like a dim opal, flecked with thin white clouds; none of the spirit of wind in it. The sun shone out weakly now and then, and a blue veil of mist hung over the distant wood, making the near trees look yet browner. The leaves no longer crackled under one's feet, but lay damp and flattened on the path, in spots of scarlet and yellow.

We were near the pond, and the boys had run forward to find a place where they could thrust out their boats from the bank, when I heard the sharp canter of a horse on the road behind us. His rider apparently reined him in as he approached. I did not turn round, but I was sensible of the fact from the prolonged snort, the chafing of the bit, and the measured click of the hoof in the soft wet road. Just then, a country-girl passed me, laden with violets for the Paris market. Their fragrance was very seductive, and I looked longingly at them,

for I had always a passion for violets; but I had not a sou in my pocket, and walked on. The horseman dismounted, and called to the girl. I started. Was it not a voice I knew? He threw the bridle over his arm, and following me, said, in a low tone,

“Will Miss Percival allow me to offer her these flowers?”

It was Lord Rawdon. I stood still, and all power of speech seemed to leave me. He was pale and haggard, and I saw that his arm was still in a sling. It brought a rush of recollections back, and with them a sense of what was due to him from me. I held out my hand.

“Forgive me, Lord Rawdon. I am not very strong—my nerves have been much shaken of late—and the surprise of seeing you almost paralysed me, I think. You look ill. I am afraid you have suffered much, and I am very, *very* sorry to see your arm is still disabled.”

“It is almost worth having gone through it all to hear you say so, though I suppose it's only a conventional expression of compassion—what you would feel if one of Franconi's men were spilt, eh? Miss Per-

cival, I have been in Paris a fortnight, and during that time I have walked and ridden round and round your house, hoping to see you, till I believe the gendarmes began to suspect me of burglarious intentions. I didn't call, for I heard it was no use—that you wouldn't see any one ; and your father is not wrapped up in me, as you are aware. You never left the house, that I could make out, till this morning, when I thought of ordering my horse an hour before the Paris world is awake. I am repaid.”

His manner, which was always strange, seemed to me stranger than ever. His voice was hard and hoarse, as one who has known no rest, and there was a tremulousness in certain accents, which, when I looked at his wild, fierce eyes, made me feel anything but comfortable.

“I am glad you chanced to meet me,” said I, not choosing to understand him, but desirous of appearing at my ease. “I have often wished to see you since that disastrous meeting, to explain to you the strange circumstances under which you saw me that night. I do not know—I mean, I am sure, you only thought, at the time, like a chival-

rous gentleman, as you proved yourself; but afterwards it must often have occurred to you as strange."

"Not at all. I cleared the mystery for myself. I went back to the house and questioned the porter, and after that wild young fellow, De Vailly, had winged me, he had the good taste to own that he had never seen you before, and had no idea who you were."

"I thank you, Lord Rawdon, sincerely, but you caused me a great deal of misery by that unhappy duel. Do you still suffer much?"

"Suffer!" he exclaimed, looking through me with that burning eye of his. "Come, you shall hear something of what I have suffered—of what I still suffer. Do you remember that first night we met? I believe I am a changed man since then."

"I hope we are both changed since then," I replied, gravely.

"But it is not a change for the better in me, I tell you. I suffer from the fierce torture of a passion I never felt before. I have struggled for months to drive your image from my heart, for I knew you didn't care for me. I thought that absence—and then,

fool that I was!—the old reckless life, and the smiles of other women, fairer by far, would force me, in time, to forget you. I wrestled with my passion till it wore my very vitals. It has made me the wretched-looking creature you see—not my wound—don't fancy that. And if this is not enough, know further, that I suffer—though I have never owned it to mortal before—from the torments of an uneasy conscience, and because I believe in so little that is good here—in nothing happy hereafter!”

“God help you, then, for vain is the help of man! Without hope, this life would be insupportable. It is a long and a dark and dreary way to many of us—a succession of falls, as some one says—but we should get up each time trying to see the light at the end brighter.”

“Mud we are, and unto mud shall we return! That is the only future we can be certain of. I have no faith now; I am a useless mass, cumbering the earth.”

“It grieves me to hear you,” I said, “disavowing that imperishable part of yourself, which is no more part of the earth than the mist yonder is of the hill it colours. You

do yourself great wrong. You have naturally fine qualities of heart—great mental gifts—why waste and abuse them?”

“Oh, Marguerite—I must call you so *once*—do you not feel it is in your power, and yours only, to lift me up from this mire—to lead me to purer and better things? My God! what woman ever had the influence over a man you would have? With you, perhaps, I might learn the way to heaven: without you, I must live out this hell on earth until I find oblivion in the grave.”

“You strangely deceive yourself, Lord Rawdon. I am too little of a saint to help any one. I need, on the contrary, a firm, strong hand to prevent me from falling.”

“I tell you, there may be other women better, wiser—you are the only one for me. Marguerite, that first night we met, I was idiot enough to ask you jestingly the gravest question a man can put to a woman. God knows, in a very different spirit—with the strength and fervour of my whole soul—I now repeat it.”

“I answer as I did then.”

“Have pity on me, Marguerite. Consider this is all I live for now. Give me time—

give me hope. You said that without it life was insupportable."

"I spoke of a hope no one can take away. Alas! Lord Rawdon, as regards myself, I can give you none. You ask why? But you supplied the best reason yourself just now—the only insurmountable one a woman can give—that I do not love you. I wish I could be to you as a sister, but that has passed into a conventional phrase, and means nothing; or rather, constituted as society is, it means ~~an~~ impossibility. Friendship and gratitude are cold words, but I shall always feel a true, deep interest in your welfare—I don't mean your worldly welfare, of course—I mean your soul's. I hope and pray that you may become a better and a happier man. I have no right to preach, as I have already said, nor have I the inclination—but I do earnestly hope——"

"Marguerite, Marguerite, you don't know what you are doing, to drive a man like me desperate. Tell me—promise me, at least, that you will not be persuaded into marrying that old Frenchman. I see the web gathering round you: I know the danger that threatens, and the hand that directs all the

threads of it; but I shall be there, at hand, watching over, and ready to defend you, if you will only let me."

"There is no danger of my being persuaded to marry the Marquis d'Ofort, or any one whom my heart does not choose, thank you. I can promise you that, safely."

We stood by the glassy pond, on which Roger had already launched his boat, both boys being too much engrossed to pay much attention to my companion. They clapped their hands, exultant, as the keel cleft the waters, and the miniature frigate rode gallantly forwards. Then a little puff of wind caught it, and it drifted towards a mud-bank: its masts got entangled in the reeds and rushes, and it capsized.

"Is not that an emblem of my life?" said Rawdon, gloomily. "Look there, the toy will fill with water, and must sink."

"Come," I answered, smiling, "walk round to that point, and stretch out your riding-whip. You will easily set it right. The type is not a true one—the poor boat couldn't steer itself, nor extricate itself, when once entangled."

He recovered it, and the boys, in their

frank, hearty way, thanked the dark gentleman for his kindness.

"It is nearly eleven o'clock, Roger; we must be going home. Get up on your horse, Lord Rawdon, and oblige me by turning his head in *that* direction. And, if you would not deprive me of the only pleasure I have—my early walks—you will not try and repeat this meeting."

I held out my hand once again: he seized it, and looked into my face with wild, regretful eyes, and before I knew what he was doing, he pressed my fingers passionately to his lips.

He spoke no word, and the next moment was upon his horse, and galloping down a by-road in the wood.

"Who is that gentleman, Rity? and why does he have his arm in a sling?"

"He is a friend who once did me a great service, Roger, and he has been badly wounded."

"What makes him kiss your hand in that funny way?"

"As to that, it is a foolish way some people have of wishing good-by.—Dear boys, I have never asked you to keep a secret,

have I? but I have reasons for not wishing you ever to speak about this gentleman, or allude to him in any way. I can depend on you, I know."

But the precaution was vain: exactly what I least wished had come to pass. Half an hour after I returned home my father entered my room. I read in his face immediately that something had occurred to make him angry.

"You are certainly the strangest girl," he began. "I never could understand you." (I thought he had never taken much pains.) "You're a mass of hypocrisy, I believe. Here you pretend to be in such grief that you can't see any one, and I find you are seen out walking, before breakfast, with that d—d fellow Rawdon. What the devil do you mean by it? Have you no regard for the world's opinion? Are you become perfectly indifferent as to what people say of you?"

Time was when I should have replied, "You have shown yourself very indifferent to what the world has said of me already;" but I only bowed my head.

"Well? What have you to say?"

"Very little. I was walking, and Lord Rawdon joined me. There was no intention, on my part, of meeting. I greeted him, as I should any one else I know well; and when I asked him to ride on, he did so."

"Not until he had kissed your hand. I have it from an eye-witness. Do you allow all casual acquaintances you meet to do that?"

"No. He is not a casual acquaintance."

"Perhaps, as your father, I may be allowed to ask if—if you're engaged to this madman?—a wild, unprincipled fellow, who has already run through more than half his fortune"—(Oh, world! world!)"—"his estates heavily mortgaged, and this year, at Baden, he lost more than twenty thousand pounds at play, I hear."

"That would indeed be enough to deter me from marrying Lord Rawdon, if I had not already refused him," I replied, with an irrepressible touch of sarcasm.

"To be seen with him is enough to ruin all your prospects in life."

"I have none."

He turned away with an impetuous "Pshaw!" then suddenly exclaimed, "How

long, may I ask, do you propose remaining shut up in this absurd way, without seeing any one?—except in your morning walks, that is to say. There's reason in everything. Your poor mother has been dead six months. It's such d—d affectation in a girl of your age pretending you can't go out. But you've no consideration for *me*."

"I would do anything in the world to make you happy at home, father. I don't think my going out could contribute to your comfort in the least. You didn't think so last year, you know: you preferred my going out with some one else."

"I should like to have two or three friends at dinner sometimes—but you'd go and shut yourself up, I suppose, if I did?"

"I think, with your means, you can ill afford to give dinner entertainments. We never did so in my dear mother's lifetime, father."

"Oh, my affairs are in a better state now; the money market is looking up. By-the-by, come out and take a walk with me this afternoon."

Nothing could be more distasteful to me, but I would not refuse; and, like many a

conscientious act in this world—spite of what moralists say,—the result did not bring its reward. My father took me up the Champs Elysées just at the hour when it is most crowded; he bowing, nodding, stopping to *button* some one at every three or four paces. I kept my thick black veil down, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and yet I felt quite giddy and bewildered with the constant tide of faces flowing past me. Presently we met—accidentally, of course—a line of venerable French dandies, midmost among whom was the Marquis d'Ofort. He wore a coat much padded across the chest, and giving occasion for many gilt buttons; and upon his head a hat exceedingly curled in the brim, and poised at such an inclination over the right ear, that it seemed ready to topple over. If I felt inclined to laugh the first moment I saw him, the feeling very soon gave place to a dead and dreary despair, when, after a cordial greeting to his “bon ami—ce brave Colonel,” and an elaborate salutation to me, he left his brethren and joined us in our walk. I thought that walk never would come to an end. I was reduced to such a state of mental nausea and exhaus-

tion at last (at the end of a second hour, I believe), that I was obliged to beg my father would take me home; and when I heard him request the favour of the Marquis's company at dinner on the following Sunday, I would rather have been condemned to pass that day at the treadmill.

"We shall be *four* at dinner," said my father, as we were going up-stairs; "you will make preparations accordingly."

CHAPTER VI.

THREE days after that walk—it was on a Monday or a Tuesday—Arthur ran into my room with a note in his hand.

“Rity, here’s something for you. As I was spinning my top outside there, that dark gentleman rode up and gave me this, and told me to be sure and give it to you yourself. And then he said if I was spinning my top to-morrow, he would be sure and bring me something. I hope he won’t forget.”

The note was written in blotted characters—almost illegible in parts. It ran thus:

“I have spent days and nights of passionate, fevered restlessness since I saw you. I should go mad if I really believed it was my *irrevocable fate* that I learnt from your lips.

It shall not be. Who is there to watch over you,—who is there to lay down his life for you, but I? Oh! worthless and reprobate that I am, yet I love you as never man loved. And I, alone, see all the dark threads weaving round you, poor child! You know nothing of them, and yet you must break through this net, and it cannot be done by sitting still. Let me see you, if it be but for five minutes. You have not walked out these three mornings; perhaps you are not allowed. Your father, I suppose, was warned of our meeting, for, as I rode away, I found I had been followed and watched. *I put a stop to that for ever. It will not happen again.* I promise not to say a word of *myself* if you will see me, Marguerite. But whether you will or not, you cannot prevent my watching over you: and sooner or later we *must* meet, before the drama is played out.

“ R.”

The writer's state gave me much more uneasiness, as I read this, than any fears for myself. Painful and annoying as the persecution was to which I was subjected (and of course the “dark threads” could only have

reference to this), the days of lock and key and forced marriages were passed. Rawdon's heated imagination invested my position with unnecessary terrors. I wished I had some wise and gentle woman-friend, who would have gone on an errand of mercy from me, and endeavoured to soothe the irritated state of his mind. But I had none. I could only sit still and tremble for what I might hear next; and tell my little brother to say there was "no answer," for, of course, I could not see him, and writing was worse than useless.

My father's conduct towards me had undergone a sensible change during these three days. I was no longer completely "lef' to my own 'vices," as Betsy expressed it; and in this she approved (for the first time in her life) of my father's conduct: holding, like most of her class, solitude to be a slow poison, and *any* sort of society a wholesome antidote thereto. My father made me walk with him daily; my only stipulation being that the boys should accompany us; and though he resisted this strongly, saying it was like "taking out a school," he yielded when I reminded him that they had only another week to be at home. I skil-

fully managed in these walks that the boys should be between me and the Marquis, who invariably joined us; but my father's evident efforts to force the society of that venerable nobleman upon me were not confined to these occasions. The same day that I received Rawdon's note, my father sent for me into the drawing-room. I found the Marquis there, come to pay his "homages," and to place the Minister of State's opera-box at my disposal that night: it was perfectly "*convenable*," he assured me, to "*assister en devil*." I thanked him; I went out nowhere; the Grand Opéra I particularly disliked; I was occupied just now, would he excuse me? and I curtsied out of the room. I flatter myself that I was ladylike and civil; but it would be paying my manner a compliment to call it icy, for ice *will* melt, and nothing would have melted me.

Five minutes later my father entered my room: he was pale with anger.

"Upon my life, you treat my friends in the most de haut en bas manner, Rita. I can tell you you are very much mistaken if you think I shall allow it. Things are not going on in this way for ever."

"I hope not."

"You've had a great deal too much of your own way, young lady. Henceforward you will be good enough to understand that you are to receive my friends *civilly*, and just as many as I choose, or you shall go out again into the world. If not, by G—d——"

"Father, father! remember my mother. I am not fit to see strangers, or mix in the world in any way just now. In the spring, perhaps, when Rose has asked me to go to England on a visit, I may——"

"No; I tell you that won't do. It doesn't suit my plans that you should go to England and marry a country curate with forty pounds a year, which is just what you would do, with your romantic ideas. I shall probably take you to Baden in the summer, and my friend, D'Ofort, will accompany us. So, in the mean time, I *desire* that you will curb that confounded temper of yours, and not be so surly to him. He is a most liberal old fellow, and quite the *vieille cour*—one of the oldest families in France—what more do you want?"

"Why, even for a mere acquaintance a

little more might be desirable; for a husband, a good deal."

"It strikes me you expect a good deal more than you will get, and that you'll be a very hard bargain to whoever you accept at last. The fact is, your head was completely turned last year by that d—d fellow Rawdon, and your puritanical admirer, Mr. Rochford, who filled you with absurd ideas, and then rode off—which showed he was more sensible than I gave him credit for; and I believe, if the truth was known, you're pining after *him*, instead of thinking how you can settle yourself respectably in life."

I looked my father full in the face, though my voice quivered, and I said, "If by settling respectably you mean marrying an old man of the worst character (for whom I feel the most profound disgust and contempt) because he is wealthy and highly born, I do not understand the term as you do. Let it be distinctly understood that the Marquis d'Ofort comes here as your friend, not as having anything to say to me, and I will try and endure his presence."

"Very filial, really. Now, be so good as

to put on your bonnet and come out with me."

My father's mouth was set into that hard and dogged expression I know it always wore when he was bent on carrying something through, without pity or compunction. When we were in the street, instead of turning, as usual, into the Champs Elysées, he strode out in the opposite direction, into the labyrinths of the Chaussée d'Antin. We stopped at last before the door of a handsome house, and my father pulled the bell.

"Father, where are we going?"

"To pay a visit."

"To whom?"

"To invite our second guest at dinner tomorrow."

"If you please, I will remain in that shop the while."

"But I *don't* please. I insist on your coming up-stairs. You needn't be afraid; it is no one who will fall in love with you; but I'd advise you to make yourself as pleasant as you can."

"I never pay visits, and really, father, I beg—to a person I don't know——"

“Don’t know ? but you *must* know her,” almost shouted my father. I was really terrified at the violence of his manner. He grasped my arm, and half dragged me upstairs. Further discussion was useless, and would only have led to greater irritation on his part; there was nothing to be done but to yield with as good a grace as I could. A dim suspicion flashed on me as to whom I was brought here to visit,—that mysterious figure in the background, of whom I had more than once had a hint as influencing largely my father’s conduct and opinions.

He pulled the bell of the entresol: a servant in livery opened the door. No question was asked, no name mentioned: my father, drawing my arm through his, passed in. We entered a large, low salon, richly decorated in white and gold, at the further end of which sat a lady, who might be described in somewhat similar terms. For she was rather large, and not very tall, and dressed in a white Turkish peignoir, embroidered in gold down the front and sleeves. I instantly recognised her as the person I had seen on my father’s arm at Marshal Soult’s ball. The countenance was

strangely and indelibly impressed on my memory. Depraved Roman empresses had come to me, formerly, over my history, somewhat after this likeness; the same low brows, and bands of snake-like hair, bold, handsome eyes, hard, aquiline nose, so white and sharply cut, the same over-full sweep of the inferior lip, showing such lines of brilliant teeth when she laughed. It was a magnificent head, certainly, but I should have preferred positive ugliness. There was something in the expression of her eyes that sent a shiver through me, and by the triumph that glittered there, I know that she saw at a glance what I felt, while her manner became still more sleek and feline. She came forward, holding out both her hands, and drew me to the sofa on which she had been sitting when we entered.

“Madame de Barrènes, I have brought you my daughter, whom you were kind enough to wish to know.”

“I have, indeed, long desired it.” (She spoke in French.) “That dear Colonel promised some time ago to bring you, but you know how faithless he is! I dare say

he never said a word to you about it. Dear child ! I would not intrude myself on your affliction, knowing——In short, women understand these things better than men, otherwise I would have come and mingled my tears with yours. I hope our friendship may ripen fast ; there is something *sympathetic* in our natures, I am sure. I adore books ; if it were not for my literary pursuits my life would be very dreary. Would you like to see my article on the “Expansion of the Soul,” in the *Trois Mondes* ? My taste, I confess, is somewhat an abstruse one for a woman, but I occupy myself solely with philosophy and moral development” (my eye caught the words, “par Paul de Kock,” on the back of a volume that protruded from a sofa-cushion beside me), “and never read the depraved literature of the day. Have you read Victor Cousin’s last work ? No ? Ah ! you have a treat there.”

My father looked rather bored while this was going on, as if it was not the sort of thing to which he was accustomed, and that we might be spared it. But Madame was not to be balked of her morality ; so I sat

at the edge of the sofa, looking very foolish, with my hands in Madame's, while she continued :

"Are you fond of the drama, chère petite? Ah! I quite understand,—the plays they give here generally are so unsuited for a young girl. A friend of mine has sent me a box to see the first representation of a comedy of his to-morrow evening at the Théâtre-Français. At the Français, everything is *irréprochable*; un peu lourd, peut-être, mais tout ce qu'il y a de plus moral. —Will you do me the pleasure to accompany me?"

"By-the-by," cut in my father, "we came expressly to ask you to dine with us to-morrow, chère Comtesse."

"Enchanted; and the play afterwards. It will be a fête for me, who so seldom go into the world! I lead the life of a recluse, my dear. I hope you will come often to my little hermitage? How like you she is, Colonel! Just that proud English air. But you must not remain shut up in this way, dear child; you must conquer your feelings. Ah! I know what that is too well!—but for the sake of *ce cher papa* you must make the

exertion. Those cheeks are too pale. I should recommend a little *gris lilac* under the bonnet; all that black is so unbecoming! Ah! by-the-by, cher Colonel, have you heard this dreadful report about the Galoffska?—pauvre Galoffska!”

“No. What is it? I had a note from her two or three days ago;” and my father glanced towards me.

“Found poisoned in bed this morning, with the bottle of laudanum in her hand. They say she killed herself partly from jealousy of that roué milord—that she had a terrible scene with him yesterday. Ah! look you, the women who lead these dreadful lives always come to some bad end.”

“By G—d! how shocking! I dare say that blackguard Rawdon has been entirely the cause of it.”

“Who knows?” responded Madame, shrugging her shoulders. “Her debts, *on dit*, are enormous. As milord gambled, and has lost so much, perhaps she supplied him with money, poor thing!”

My indignation here overcame my repugnance to speak.

“I will answer for it that is not true.

Lord Rawdon has faults and follies enough, but he is a true gentleman. No one who is such would accept a woman's money for his own vicious pursuits."

Madame de Barrènes gave my father a peculiar look, and a half-inward smile flitted over her features, but they were decently composed the next instant. The latter rose impatiently, and I lost no time in following his example.

"A demain," said the Comtesse, with her most captivating smile. "The Marquis of course dines with you. Excellent and benevolent old man ! How infinitely preferable is such society as his to that of the wild young men of the day !"

As she spoke, she passed her dimpled white hand over the glossy braids of her hair, and my sharp eye caught sight of a bracelet I recognised as having seen lying in its case upon a certain toilet-table months before.

"My departed husband's hair !" sighed she, intercepting the look I gave it.

Oh ! Charlotte Barrènes, you were quick and clever, but did you really think you imposed on me for a single half-minute ? I believe my face was a riddle you could not

make out, either then or afterwards; a frozen pond, on which you advanced little by little, cautious to tread lightly, uncertain how much it would bear, and quite unconscious what depth of water lay beneath!

This visit was the commencement, the opening chapter, followed by many which I will spare the reader—hours of trial, which I cannot even now recal without its bringing back keenly the kind of sick apprehension I lived under, though all soreness and bitterness have passed away, thank God! with the sharp edge of the actual present.

But if we are permitted hereafter to gratify our curiosity about the accumulated dust of secrets in each other's hearts, I shall look with a painful wonder to see what was passing within yours, Charlotte Barrènes, during those hours! Had you no compunction—no pity? It is hard to believe in the *complete* wickedness of any one. Experience shows that good and evil are scattered through this world in grains, not in cart-loads, as some try to prove. What secret charities this woman may have exercised—what tears she may have dried—what sufferings alleviated, I know not: let us hope there were

some. That she carried desolation and misery into many a home—that she was thoroughly hardened and unscrupulous as to what means she adopted to attain her ends, is, alas ! too true. And that I suffered, through her, the darkest and stormiest passages in my young life, I cannot *forget*, though I forgive her. She has an account elsewhere beyond my keeping.

I felt a moral conviction about Madame de Barrènes's character which her conversation, far from shaking, only strengthened. That my father should force the intimacy of such a woman on me seemed at first incredible. Viewed simply in a worldly way, the injury he was doing me he knew as well as any one. What was his motive ? To render my home so intolerable as to oblige me to exchange it for the Hôtel d'Ofort ? It seemed the only possible solution. I foresaw, with terrible distinctness now, whither all this led. I had not lived this past year for nothing. I knew how lightly a woman's name is blown about like a thistle-ball from mouth to mouth in Paris : I must grasp at anything to save my "respectability." And that my father — my father ! — instead of

shielding and sustaining his child, should, from some inexplicable cause, thrust me to the very brink of this precipice—it was hard and terrible to bear! I shuddered and turned sick when I looked down the abyss. To be married to an old worn-out debauchee, the touch of whose hand, whose laugh, were insupportable to me,—anything were better than that. Could I brave the world's gossip? Could I go on living this life, knowing what things must be whispered of me—and loud enough to reach *his* ears? Fool! what did it signify what *he* thought? Ought not my own self-respect be sufficient to sustain me? Was not the knowledge of my own helplessness enough? For the more I thought over it, the more difficult it was to know how to act. Twice that I attempted to speak to my father he became so excited that I found it hopeless to bring him to reason. His manner was that of a man who has drammed himself to carry through a certain deed. Remonstrance only inflamed him into a sort of temporary insanity. I had no course left me but to yield, and receive the obnoxious visitors my father thrust upon me.

The dinner did not take place next day after all, I believe in consequence of the Marquis's sudden indisposition. At all events, I know I was relieved from his society for several days, during which whole hecatombs of flowers were offered up to me, which I dared not refuse, and which were indeed very agreeable substitutes for his presence. But Madame de Barrènes lost no time (as I anticipated) in letting the world see the intimate footing on which we stood. Her beautifully-appointed little carriage drew up the following afternoon, as my father and I were walking in the Champs Elysées, and from it she descended (that magnificent hermit !), a glitter of blue velvet and white fur. She joined us, causing a general commotion among the pedestrians by her luminous appearance, and creating in me a strong desire to take to my heels and run home. I can never forget the sense of shame and confusion with which I felt all eyes fixed on us as we walked along ; and when, a few minutes afterwards, Lord Rawdon passed us on horseback and raised his hat, I was at no loss to interpret the look he gave me. And every succeeding afternoon, for a fortnight or

more, it was the same thing. Madame de Barrènes assiduously drove in the wedge of her acquaintance: she would take no denial when she called, but though assured I was not "visible," said of course the prohibition did not extend to her, and gently thrust past the feeble domestic. My father, at other times, ushered her into my room himself; at other times, again, I was sent for, and found the Marquis (resuscitated) with Madame in the drawing-room. Madame, on these occasions, unrepelled by my coldness, talked her very best, which was a pity, for it would have been much better if it had not been quite so good. In her own element, I dare say she could be amusing. But wishing to unite for my benefit the sentimental elegance of a Lamartine with the didactic morality of a Maintenon, the effect was incongruous, like all patchworks, and—to my taste, at least—utterly disagreeable. Her manner of advancing her opinions was subjective, as though her point were to draw *me* out rather than commit herself to any decided view; but I was wise enough to remember that immediately a woman uses her tongue, her judgment no longer remains calm, cool,

unbiased. I preferred listening to her, and drawing my own inferences therefrom. And the result showed I was right. At the end of two or three weeks, Madame knew as little about me (except that I was a silent, proud, and disagreeable girl) as the first moment we met. And I learnt in that time that the dangerous axiom of language being intended to conceal thought demands an astuteness and consistency in lying of which very few are capable. Watch the conversation of the most accomplished of society's actors for a length of time, you shall find some of the essence of their nature oozing out. To lie well requires a good memory: this is lying on the most extended scale,—the whole life and conversation a lie. Madame de Barrènes's accomplishment did not reach the finish of high art: there were constantly little discrepancies between the sentiments of yesterday and to-day. I have said that she rarely advanced a subject boldly: there was one, however, to which she constantly recurred, and on which she never failed to dilate—the excellence, the wisdom, and the wealth of Amédée-Joseph, Marquis d'Ofort.

My little brothers had returned to England. This was but a small addition to my trou-

bles, perhaps, yet their presence had been companionship and something of protection too, however slender, and I felt doubly alone now they were gone.

How I longed that I were a man, to throw off this heavy chain of inaction—to go forth into the world and work my way to honour, if it might be—at least, to independence! And here I was compelled to sit with folded hands, and a restless, fluttering heart, that beat against its cage as though it were like to break. The ground seemed failing beneath my feet. I trusted in my own strength, thinking it a staff, and in the hour of trial it proved a broken reed. For I knew little of the comfort and friendliness of prayer at that time; I asked and gave thanks for physical wants, and I looked forward to the time when I should be united to all those I loved in a happier sphere; but I took no “counsel with God,” I did not rely on Him alone for guidance and support.

I had heard several times from Miss Lateward—kind letters, containing very little on the only subject that could interest me from that quarter. Mr. Rochford was building a school-house, or Mr. Rochford was gone to stay with his relatives the Nevilles; and once

only it was recorded that, on seeing my mother's death in the paper, he had asked Miss Lateward whether she had heard from me. "I was not aware you had ever met him," she wrote. "I suppose the acquaintance was very slight, as you have never named it."

I now sat down to write to that good woman, feeling it a relief to unburden myself, even though it was impossible to enter into more than a sketch of my position. I could not tell her all on paper, as I might have done, alone, into her ear. The letter we write is like a listener to the confidences we would make our friend—we cannot be sure that no other eyes shall see it.

And so three weeks more were gone: each week bringing me into closer contact with the two persons whom I most dreaded in the whole world. At times, my mind was in a state of excitement that bordered on insanity (and then there was no desperate deed of which I felt I could not be guilty), alternating with depression as complete and violent when the flood-gates of my soul gave way. Three weeks, beating and struggling on against the rapidly increasing stream from day to day !

CHAPTER VII.

BETSY set her resolute little back against the door.

"No, mum: very sorry, mum, but it's impossible to-day. Miss Marg'ret's particular unwell, and can't see no one, on no account."

"Betsy," I cried, from the inner room, "beg Madame de Barrènes to walk in. I feel better."

My illness was indeed far more mental than physical. Still, I was very weak, and suffering from a violent headache. But I had suddenly resolved to alter my conduct in some measure as regarded Madame de Barrènes. Let her be admitted: and she entered, glowing with sympathy and the frosty wind.

"I began to think I was never to see you again, petite. Yesterday you shut the door

against me—that obstinate little woman had locked it, for I tried—and to-day——”

“Your friendship burst the lock. Thank you, Comtesse. And now, what object can you have in visiting a dull, melancholy girl every day? Of course, it is very kind of you; but I suppose you have some object. I have too high an opinion of your cleverness to suppose you would bore yourself—and me—without *some* motive.”

Madame, for once in her life, was thrown aback. She looked perfectly aghast, never having heard so many words issue from my lips before in the whole course of our acquaintance. She quickly recovered her presence of mind, and said, slowly,

“You are right. I have another motive, which is, my pity for your position, and my wish to improve it, though I see you will not believe in the interest I take in you. The Colonel, between you and me, *chère enfant*, will leave his children only some thousand pounds’ worth of *debts*, if he dies to-morrow. What think you? Were it not better to accept the certainty of a high and honourable name, a great fortune, and a worthy husband, instead of——Ah! I shud-

der to think of it! Le cher Colonel is afflicted, too, when he thinks of it. And, remember, no ardent young lover is ever half as much aux petits soins as an old husband. Mine was seventy when I married."

"Was the result satisfactory, Madame?"

"Perfectly. Depend on it, for comfort, there is nothing like a husband of a certain age" (d'un age mûr).

"To produce so admirable a wife, I doubt it not. Still, I don't think I shall marry."

"Really?—then you must be in love—ça n'empêche pas," said she, putting her feet on the fender, and drawing up the skirt of her dress. I looked her steadily in the face. She quickly recalled that piece, and made another move. "Of course a charming girl, like you, has *numbers* of lovers."

"But I cannot marry a number, Madame; and if I like no one in particular?"

"Perhaps that wild English milord? They say he quarrelled with la pauvre Gallofska solely on your account, and swore he would never even see her again, because she wrote that note to your father. I hear he would commit any folly for your sake?"

"It would be a worse one than he ever committed if I were to marry him."

"I rejoice to hear you say so, *ma chère*. Then, if there is really no one who has engaged your young affections, what objection can you have to such an unexceptionable *parti* as the Marquis? It is really extraordinary how he worships you! He has experienced many tender passions, of course, in his long life, but never one so strong as *this*—unquenchable even by your coldness. He knows he cannot expect love from you in return—toleration is all he hopes for. You would find he is a true philosopher, *chère petite*."

"Epicurean, I should think."

"Not at all; he eats very little"—as if she were talking of a dog.

"Even Paris society, which is not over particular, considers him a 'bad subject.'"

"Look you, my dear, *il faut être raisonnable*. You cannot have perfection. Christian charity forbids."

"Pardon me. We will not discuss charity. Though painters represent that virtue with such abundant breasts, it is a cold sentiment to marry upon. Were you ever in love, *Madame*?"

"What a question! Of course, my dear, I adored my husband."

"Then you can understand my not wishing to marry until I am equally fortunate."

We sat on either side of the fire, I and this woman, trying to read each other's faces in the fitful light of the wood-flames, for it was now quite dusk. But the tightly-gloved fingers of Madame's plump little hand, held out fan-wise to guard her from the fire, cast strange barred shadows all across her face, making the expressions there difficult to seize.

"Ma chère," said she, sinking her voice to an oily whisper, "have you considered your father?"

"What of him, Madame?"

"Well, you must think of him, in this affair, as an affectionate daughter. The advantage to him will be so great."

"How so? To get rid of me, do you mean?"

"Quelle idée!"

"Perhaps he intends taking up his abode at the Hôtel d'Ofort?"

"No; but the Marquis's wealth, as you know, is very great."

"And you think he will feel inclined, after he is married, to feed my father's extravagance?"

"Perhaps not; but it might be possible"—a pause—"to come to some little arrangement. The Marquis, I *know*, would be willing and happy to——"

"In other words, I am to be sold to pay my father's debts."

"Ma chère, you see these questions in a very coarse point of view."

"I endeavour to see the *truth*, Madame; and truth, like Nature, *is* rather coarse sometimes."

"We must not be selfish, chère petite, in this world. You will be doing a good action—supporting your father, like the Roman daughter. And, after all, if you have not a handsome young husband, il faut bien se passer de quelque chose dans ce monde, n'est-ce-pas? You will console yourself in your philosophy, as I have done."

"I am afraid of such philosophy, Madame, and the consolations that spring from it."

"Besides which," she continued, dropping her voice, "you see, he is very old, my dear.

It will not last for ever, and then you will be free."

If she could have seen my face, she must have read the loathing and horror I felt for her at that moment; but it was too dark. I leant back, and pressed my hands before my eyes.

"No, no," I murmured after her, with a very different meaning, "it will *not* last for ever!"

She rose to go. "I hope you will be wise, petite, and think over this." She approached and held out her hand.

At that moment I experienced one of those strange and awful sensations which remain indelibly impressed on the mind of any one who has been similarly situated. I cannot tell whether it was only the effect of an overwrought imagination,—I cannot argue about, or account for it,—but, as I looked up in the dim twilight of the chamber, I distinctly saw the figure of my mother glide between Madame de Barrènes and myself, and thrust back the hand of the former, brushing me with her long black garments as she passed between us.

I gave a sharp cry, and started up.

“ Mon Dieu ! qu'est-ce que c'est ? ”

“ Stand back !—stand back ! There !—do you see nothing ?—How can you venture to stand there ?—How dare you remain in her sacred presence ? Mother—mother—mother ! ”

And the next thing I remember, was hearing Madame de Barrènes call loudly for Betsy, saying she thought I had a fit. The good creature ran in, and Madame remarked that I was in a highly nervous state, and fancied I had seen something—she was afraid I was ill ; I must be watched with care ; sickness was very prevalent in Paris just now. And with similar exordiums she left me to the good offices of my faithful nurse.

* * * *

After a sleepless night, during which I was haunted by the image of my mother, I rose ; and my father soon after entered the room. He expressed his concern to hear I was so unwell, “ because I wanted to try and persuade you to go to a ball at the Hôtel de Ville to-morrow night.”

“ Father,” said I, seizing his hand, “ I will

do anything, if you will promise me that I shall no longer be persecuted by that hateful old man. Say that you will go *alone* with me, and I will go to this ball; though God knows how little my heart is in tune for it!"

"There's a good girl. Yes, we'll go alone, Rita—alone!"

"And you promise that, if I go into the world with you, I shall be no longer intruded on as I have been in my own home? And you will not urge me to marry a man I hate?"

My father turned away his head.

"Promise me."

"Idiot! You will drive me to take the last step by your obstinacy—one I had hoped to be saved from. Consider what you are doing—before it is too late."

"You speak in riddles, father. But one thing only is clear and certain to me—that I shall go mad if this sort of life continues much longer. In one way or another it must end. Either I must leave you, and endeavour to get a livelihood somehow in honest industry, or——"

"On your own head be the consequences

of this," interrupted my father, with an unsteady voice, as he turned towards the door. "You will go with me to the ball to-morrow, and *I* shall never urge the Marquis's suit upon you again, nor shall Madame de Barrènes be again *an intruder in this house.*"

As Betsy was brushing my hair, she suddenly suspended her operations in looking out of window.

"It do be a curious thing how often I see that man a-prowling round the house here, miss. Look opposite, under the port-coach-ear. I wonder—um—whether he can have anything to do with a gentleman as has stopped me two or three times near the door, quite promiscuous, as I was a-running to get half a pound of tea at the corner—and shocking bad it is, which isn't here nor there, only six francs a pound for sich sloe-leaves! and I in a hurry—and he stops and says, 'How is your young mistress?' 'Nicely, sir,' says I. 'Tell her I am always watching over her,' says he—or words to that defect—and slips some money into my hand. 'I'm obliged to you, sir,' says I—but he was gone! And now I think of it,

there's something else I've had it on my mind to tell you since yesterday."

"What is it, Betsy?—go on."

"Why, you see, it be rather a hawk'ard thing—and a painful;" with a great tug at my hair, and waiting still further encouragement.

"Come, dear old Betsy, don't keep me."

"Nasty creature! I could ha' torn her eyes out!"

I began to tremble violently. "Go on—go on."

"Well, if you will have it" (suddenly dropping the hair about my shoulders), "I should like to know what business that Madam Barren has a-poking of her nose in here and there, and opening the door of that blessed saint's room, your dear mamma as was, and a-rummaging among her dear blessed things in the wardrobe?"

"What?" I almost screamed.

"Yes, when you was ill a-lying down, after she'd been here, I was passing the door of that room, and I hear somethink like the opening of a drawer, and I looks in, and sure enough there was Madam a-turning and

a-tossing over of everythink. That tasty satin, with the Mahometan lace, as your mamma wore at Miss Rose's wedding, on the ground ! So I asks, respectful-like, what she was a-doing of. 'Oh !' says she, 'je ne vole pas,' and draws out a Napoleon, and puts her finger to her lips, the which I refuses indignant; and jus' then the Colonel looks in at the door, and I were that angry I near told him a piece of my mind,—only for you, Miss Marg'ret, and he your father, and it would break my heart to be sent away from you. Deary ! don't cry. I were a great stoopid to tell you; only, says I to myself, the less she sees of sich folk the better, and the sooner she show that she won't stand sich conduct, thebetter !"

"This passes all bounds ! This is outrageous !" I cried. "How can my father—— Thank Heaven ! he has promised me that this woman shall not intrude here again. What unparalleled insolence ! Oh, that warning, my mother !" I sobbed, and the desecration of her memory affected me more powerfully than all my sorrows hitherto.

"Betsy," I said, some hours later, "I feel a longing to visit my mother's grave ; I must

go. Don't be afraid; I will be very calm, and it will do me good, it will, indeed. Get my bonnet, dear Betsy."

It was near four o'clock, a mild February evening. Wrapped in thick veils and cloaks, we left the house, and, stepping into a fiacre at the corner of the street, drove to the city of tombs, stopping only once on the way to buy some *immortelles*. We made our way through a labyrinth of marble monuments, gilt crosses, and graven images, to the spot where my mother's remains lay buried.

At first I thought I must have mistaken it, for the humble grave was crowned with a wreath of fresh violets; but there stood the words, still black and sharp from the stone-cutter's chisel:

"Sacred to the Memory of Marguerite, the beloved wife——"

Alas! what mockery it seemed! Her earthly home knew her name no longer. The stone wore not away so quickly as her memory had done in the heart that here proclaimed its grief in set phrase. Whose, then, was the hand that had scattered loving thoughts in flowers? God be with them, whoever they might be! I knelt down and

kissed the cold damp stone, and Betsy moved away to a little distance. There I lay, my head buried in my hands, while my soul communed with that purified spirit who, I knew, beheld, with the angels, every secret of my heart.

"Mother," I cried low, "you know all now; speak to me and show me how to act; guide me through this dark valley, mother, for my footsteps slip, and I am very weary."

"Lean on a loving heart," said a deep voice in my ear.

It was now dusk, and as I looked up, a figure, or rather a shadow stood beside me. But I had no fear, for I recognised the voice at once. I brushed back the tears, and held out my hand.

"This is your doing;" I pointed to the freshly-strewn flowers. "By what gift of prescience did you know I was to be here to-day?"

"I did not know it. I watched you leave your house, as I have done every day; and I followed. As to the flowers, I have often come up here of late. I have felt as if it were my own mother's grave. Had she lived, she would have pleaded my cause

with you, Marguerite; for she felt kindly towards me, and thought less hardly of me than the rest of the world."

"May God reward you, Lord Rawdon, for the respect you have shown my poor mother's memory."

"Marguerite, we meet in a fitting place—beside the grave to which we are both hastening—for, mark me, you will not long survive this struggle. If you do not speedily break your chain, you must sink under it."

"Better so," said I, in a low voice. "But you are wrong. I shall not die, though my nerves have been so much shaken that I feel sometimes as if my mind were giving way. We do not die so easily; joyless, withered lives, are commoner than broken hearts. And you, my friend, have, I hope and pray, brighter things in store for you than an existence wasted in——"

"This is mockery, Marguerite!" he exclaimed, violently. "You must feel that my whole life is bound up in you. If you die—if you sacrifice yourself to that man—if you destroy your happiness for life by one fatal step, I have nothing left to live for. You think I am a passionate nature? So I am."

And yet, so little is my passion a selfish one, that I swear before God, if I could secure your happiness by it, I would blow out my brains on the spot. Life, indeed, has *only* one attraction for me; and it is only lately I've found it. Do you think I can easily give it up? Since I saw you I have spent days and nights—I have employed secret agents of all kinds—in discovering the workings of that vile conspiracy that surrounds you. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"I know it, Lord Rawdon—at least, I know *enough*. I had rather not hear anything upon this painful subject. I hope my father at length sees the futility of forcing this marriage on me, as well as the society of persons I abhor."

"Never! do not believe it; he *can't*, if he would. He is inextricably tied to them. You will awake to this fact soon. Oh! Marguerite, you would pity me if you knew all I have suffered these past weeks for your sake!—scenes I would not shock your pure ears by repeating. Alas! I bear the part-burden of another heavy sin upon my head since I last saw you—a wretched woman's death by

her own hand. God knows if it were my words that drove her to the deed! She had played a foul part—and yet it was for love of me, Marguerite!—some of that love I crave so vainly at your hands!”

“This is very terrible; but you speak as men always do, of *self*. *I*, too, have suffered; shame and agony, bitter revulsion of all feeling for my own father,—these are not light crosses, and she who lies under this stone knows they have been mine—do not add to them. It has been a heavy aggravation to think I was the indirect cause of that poor woman’s death. Leave me to go *alone* on the path God shall see fit to clear for me henceforward; indeed it is best.”

“By the memory of that mother who sees us now, Marguerite, I conjure you to hear me. She knows what perils you are in. I fancy I hear her voice now, pleading for me, and bidding you not to reject a heart that loves as mine does.”

I shuddered as I looked round on the crosses and white monumental figures that gloomed like spectres in the dusky light; the evening wind sighed and trembled, like thin

voices, through the trees. Then they died away, and in the silence that followed I heard my own heart speak plain.

“There is one for whom you know, in spite of all, you would still give up every other hope on earth; and this is not he. Though the cloud of darkness be on you, *this* is not the light of dawn. Never think that a voice from the tomb can plead for false vows.”

And I said slowly, “Lord Rawdon, I know your strong and loyal heart. I do believe your attachment is no light thing, to be swept away to make room for another. And because I believe it, I will take a step that costs any woman dear—that few, indeed, can bring themselves to take. I will show you the great obstacle to my ever loving you as you deserve. It is that *I* also have loved, even as you love me—without return! Is this humiliating? I think your devotion deserved it at my hands, and I have outlived all false pride. I do not blush for the truth: my love was no crime any more than yours. And now, you know better than any other words of mine could tell you——”

“No!” he cried, passionately, “it cannot,

shall not be. You have loved—so be it. We build up an enduring love from the ashes of our dead ones. I, too, once thought—— Oh! how different was that from my devotion to you, Marguerite. In time you will love me, I hope and believe—but I can wait; *you* cannot wait to be saved! Of two courses your father must speedily take one. If he pursue one of these courses, a lawyer will come to you with bills, promissory notes, &c., of your father's, to the amount of many thousand pounds. The lawyer will ask whether you consent to become Marquise d'Ofort, or prefer seeing your father sent to prison, all his furniture and everything he has in the world seized. It will be represented to you that you will be left utterly destitute, and your father ruined for life! Now, if this comes to pass as I anticipate, will you make me one promise?"

"What is it?"

"That you will ask for two hours' reflection. Then open your window—there is some one placed always in sight of it—and wave your handkerchief. Before the two hours have elapsed, I swear to you this money shall be paid, even if it be to my last

farthing. You will then be free, Marguerite—free as air !”

“ Ah ! no—bound fast by ties of gratitude ! Your noble heart is worthy of something warmer than this, Rawdon. But I believe your fears for me exaggerate the evil. I have promised my father I will go into society again with him, if he will free me from this persecution at home. To-morrow night I am to accompany him to the Hôtel de Ville.”

“ Monsieur,” said the gardien, approaching, “it is the hour for closing the cemetery. The gates are being locked.”

* * * *

“ Miss Marg’ret,” said Betsy, as Rawdon handed us into the fiacre and shut the door, “that’s the same gentleman as——” The rattle of the wheels over the stones drowned the rest.

CHAPTER VIII.

I SLEPT that night more peacefully than I had done for weeks. Whether from complete exhaustion, or the effect of fresh air after several days' confinement, it was late in the following day when I awoke. The return to consciousness of suffering from oblivion is like nothing else in the world. The aching sense of something weighing at my heart—I scarce knew what—when I opened my eyes on the faded curtains and well-known furniture of my little room, I remember now, as I do every circumstance of that day, with a curious particularity. There are moments—moments of mental suffering, as well as of acute bodily pain, when we are more than ever alive to the minutest objects that surround us. All our senses are sharpened, as it were, and when

we look back to the hour of trial, we find the picture that was before us then return with singular vividness.

I rose: the day was wild and threatening. The sky hung gloomfully over the opposite roofs. Gusts of wind drove a few dried leaves and sticks against the window-pane, and now and then sent a tile rattling into the street below. I looked out. A pedestrian or two scudded along, holding their cloaks across their mouths, and bending their heads before the bitter wind. One figure alone remained under the shelter of the opposite porch, sending forth clouds of smoke from a pipe, and beating on the stones with his frozen feet.

Presently a carriage drove up to our door. I recognised the white horses at once. A servant jumped from the box, and in less than a minute my father appeared, wrapped in a fur coat, stepped into the carriage, and it drove away. The man opposite immediately left his post, whistled twice, and then walked leisurely down the street. I lost sight of him; but a few minutes after, when I looked out, he had returned to his position.

As the afternoon wore on, the sky grew

wilder, and the wind more fierce and loud. I am not given to presentiments, but the weather seemed strangely in harmony with my foreboding heart, which listened and waited for something, I knew not what—but I felt that a crisis in my life was at hand.

By-and-by Betsy came in and laid my black crape dress for the evening on the bed.

“I’ve somethink for you, Miss Marg’ret. What’ll ye give me for it?” said she, with a clumsy playfulness intended to divert my thoughts. There was that in my face which told her I could not bear any long suspense. I held out my hand; a letter dropped into it. My agitation was such, though I saw at a glance it was only from Miss Lateward—a cover-full of good advice, no doubt—that it was some minutes before I could break the seal, and read as follows:

“MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,—I was more pained than surprised at the contents of your letter, being *in a measure* prepared for your statements by letters which Lady Janet Oglevie (who is an inmate here at present) received from Paris a day or two ago. These letters contained (as I *firmly* believe) most

cruel and malevolent reports concerning your 'way of going on'—to quote the vulgar phraseology used—to which I strenuously refused to give credence. Yet we all know the homely proverb, 'That to emit smoke there must be *some* flame,' and I was forced to confess that these reports could not be *wholly* groundless. Mrs. Oglevie Fisher—I do not scruple to name the writer—had herself seen you in constant and close intimacy with the Marquis d'Ofort, whose society is shunned, she says, by *all* respectable females (though Lady Janet opposes to this that her daughter-in-law invariably *invites* the said Marquis to her *parties*), and his creature, Madame de Barrènes; and she further adds that common report announces that you are to be married to him in a few days. Then follows the worst portion of the tale, which I am only induced to repeat to you that you may take some *energetic* measure to show its *falsity*, and prove how unwillingly you have been forced into this *disreputable* society. 'Miss Percival,' says the writer, 'has shown so little regard for her reputation, that many people believe the Marquis does not intend *really to marry* her. The

effrontery with which she parades her intimacy with that notorious woman, no less than her conduct with respect to Lord Rawdon, has been offensive to all right-minded persons. Poor Madame Galoffiska, at a party only a day or two before she died, said openly that she knew for a *fact* that Miss Percival had been the cause of that duel last year in which Lord Rawdon was wounded, and that she herself had seen her walking alone with him that morning in a retired part of the Bois de Boulogne! No wonder, then, that a young woman so lost to all sense of decency should be spoken of as she is.' You can imagine how *indignant* I felt on perusing the above, which Lady Janet gave into my own hands, saying, at the same time, with great warmth, she did not believe a word of it. She further added, that her daughter-in-law had always been *jealous* of you, and she pointed to a passage further down, where Mrs. Fisher *congratulates* herself that *her* daughters were never very intimate with you, though their grandmamma *had been* so blinded to your real character. This is very mean, petty, and contemptible, but it does not render these rumours the less *aggravat-*

ing; and you must do everything in your power, my dearest Marguerite, to set them at rest. Is there no lady of unblemished character, and of position, in the circle in which you move, to whom you could apply for countenance and aid? Have you spoken to Colonel Percival, firmly but temperately? The moral obligation of opposing a parent is the most cruel duty a child can be called on to perform; but, in this case, I see no choice. The narrative of your domestic annoyances is such, that, while affording an agreeable testimony to the integrity of your *heart* and the purity of your *motives*, it leaves me no room to doubt that you should have resisted his wishes more decidedly in this matter. The trial is not of your *own* creating—let this be your consolation, my dear young friend—and it might be more severe, were your *affections* in any way engaged. But, fortunately, your young heart is as yet free from the tender passion, having too frequently the unworthy for its object. The consort proposed by your father is no less *personally* distasteful to you than he is publicly objectionable. Here, then, is no conflict of sentiments. The judgment sanctions

the decision of the heart. In this matter, you alone can assist yourself; but let me counsel your writing at once to your sister, Mrs. Murray. Though giddy, I hold her to be a young person of good disposition; and; if her husband is as amiable as he has been represented, they will concur in wishing you to take up your residence, for the future, with them. I shall anxiously await tidings of you, my dear child. Before I close my letter (though such indifferent matter cannot interest *you*), I must inform you that an event is likely, before long, to interrupt 'the even tenor of our way' here. Mr. Rochford is engaged to his cousin, Miss Neville. This alliance, which has been long ardently desired by Mrs. Rochford, and has been the talk of the county for the last two years, is now formally announced. On Wednesday—the very morning, by a curious coincidence, that Lady Janet received that scandalous letter, and showed it to Mrs. Rochford and me at the breakfast-table—Mr. Rochford had a long interview with his mother, and then rode over to Neville Lodge, which is some twenty miles distant. In the evening, Mrs. Rochford, who had been in *unusually*

high spirits all day, announced to us that her son had proposed to his cousin, and been accepted. Miss Neville, I am given to understand, is a very superior person, and has, moreover, a considerable fortune, having only one brother. You may imagine that my thoughts have been much too painfully occupied to sympathise as *heartily* as I should otherwise do in the joy of this admirable mother, for whom I entertain the most *sincere regard*. Lady Janet I do not fancy *quite* approves of the marriage—perhaps on account of the near relationship. She is, moreover, peculiar and idiosyncratic in many of her views; but she always evinces the same interest in *you*, and a lively concern in your truly distressing position. I will not add more to-day than the assurance that I am ever

“Your faithful and sincere friend,

“TABITHA LATEWARD.”

I had kept on saying all along that I was prepared for this. How did I meet it when it came? The blow fell heavily. My heart had clung pertinaciously to one fond hope—none the less so, that the roots had

struck down deep and out of sight, coiling themselves round the secret fibres of my being. And now that it was torn violently up—O reader, dare I confess—no, let me shut my chamber-door—the secret of my agony shall remain sacred—not even faithful Betsy must see me now. She shakes the door, and there is no sound but as the fluttering of some poor bird within—low, smothered sobs. Enter two hours hence, reader, and you shall find a young girl with flushed face, unnaturally glittering eyes that terrify her, as she sits before her mirror—looking “uncommon well,” so Betsy thinks, as she plaits the hair around her young mistress’s head.

It was a night such as I hardly ever remember. The wind was at our back as we drove along the streets, and saw the hackney-coachmen vainly urging their horses against the storm, which drove the foot-passengers like sand before it, and which hardly any could face. We were quite silent, till suddenly my father made the obvious remark, repeated, no doubt, many thousand times that evening by comfortable gentlemen on *terra firma* :

“What an awful night this must be at sea !”

At sea ! Yes, but I would far rather have beheld the blue mountains of the watery world rising up round me, and have felt myself in the valley of the shadow of death, than have been sitting there, safe and dangerless to all outward appearance.

The contrast, when we passed into the Hôtel de Ville, radiant with light and flowers, from the howling tempest without, was striking; but I walked through it all as in a feverish dream. The ball-room, as I entered, for a moment or two reeled round with me, and I caught my father's arm tightly. The crash of trombones, the shrill laughter of the gibbering mass, rang through my brain: chandeliers, dancers, and orchestra, the whole heaved like one great bosom decked with jewels. Then my senses righted themselves. I was conscious of a figure near the door: it approached and extended its hand.

I had almost forgotten the existence of Madame de Barrènes for some hours—that was saying much, for she had been very constantly in my thoughts of late, until driven out by one yet more powerful image—and

here she stood. Our eyes met: on my part there was no other recognition, and the extended hand dropped clenched at her side.

By an evidently preconcerted arrangement, the Marquis d'Ofort, groaning under stars and ribbons, now came up and offered me his arm; my father taking Madame de Barrenes's at the same moment. I turned my head, and saw Rawdon near me in the crowd. The temptation was too great, though I had predetermined to avoid any conversation with him that night. I made him a slight movement—he was at my side, and my arm within his. We were following my father through the crowd before the Marquis had recovered from his astonishment. When my father turned his head, and saw with whom I was, his face became livid.

“I am going to dance with Lord Rawdon.” And we moved on.

“How brilliant she looks!”—“Really one would never think——”—“What a horrid position!”—“Poor thing, so young, and looks so innocent! though people say——”—“Tiens! c'est la fille dont je te parlais tout-à-l'heure.”—“C'est affreux!—ça fait pitié!”—“Que voulez-vous? elle a pris son parti!”

—"There she is—really too shocking, and her poor mother only dead a month!"—"Oh! it is seven; but still *that* is bad enough!"—"Me dear Mrs. Borrage, what can you expect, as I say, from such bringing-up? I always thought her very bold, and discouraged any eentimacy with me girls." I turned round, and stabbed the speaker—Mrs. Oglevie Fisher—with a look. My ears caught these and many other fragments as we passed through the crowded rooms. Rawdon said nothing; but his brow was thunderous, and he bit his lip till the blood started.

"Come," said I, with a ghastly sort of laugh, "let us dance. Don't lead me off to the conservatory as you did the first time I met you. I can't sit still and talk. Do you hear them say how well I look? Of course—in such capital spirits—ha! ha! Why, if I sit still and think—I say, if I begin to *think*——"

"The time for thinking is past. You must *act*. A word with you here; we shall have time enough for dancing by-and-by." And he led me through a suite of small *salons*, occupied only by a few whist-players and a

politician or two, to a small room at the end which was quite empty. He drew me into the deep embrasure of a window, which looked into the great square, having a side-glance at the river, where the lamps were reflected like floating fires in its perturbed waters. The scene in the square was strange. The moon shone out every now and then, between great gusts of black cloud that drifted over it; the wind blew out the linkmen's torches, drove carriages against each other, and almost swept the heavy-cloaked dragoons from their saddles; it shrieked and rattled along the windows, and seemed to plough up the very ground; and through it all rose the shouts of coachmen and gendarmes. Rawdon pointed towards the bridge.

"Do you see a solitary dark figure standing under that lamp?"

"Close to the river? yes. Some poor wretch, perhaps, weary of his life, and thinking what repose he would find from all his troubles there."

"On the contrary, a man full of spirit and vigour—a man devoted to my service, Mar-

guerite—who is watching this window now, as he has watched yours for many and many an hour.”

I was silent, and he continued :

“Do you know why he is there? On the other side of that bridge a post-carriage is waiting. At a signal from me—at this window—he will bring it over here. At the barrier four other horses will be in waiting all night. Now or never is the moment to free yourself—to decide your fate. Listen : do not shake your head, Marguerite, but listen to me.”

“How can you urge it, after what I told you yesterday? Leave me—pray leave me—never mind what becomes of me. Do not——”

“My God! Marguerite, do you know what the terrible life in store for you is? Has not this last blow been sufficient? Will you consent to remain under your father’s roof after it?”

“What do you mean? I am wretched enough, God knows! but my position is no worse than it has been for many weeks.”

“Is it possible, Marguerite, that you do not know——Hush! some one is coming in

here." And he drew me further back into recess, over which the heavy velvet curtain fell.

Two persons entered: they spoke low, but with great vehemence. The moment I heard their voices, I shrank yet closer to the window; my heart beat so fast and loud, it seemed to me they must hear it. But the speakers were too much engrossed in their conversation, and though the lady seated herself opposite a mirror, and began adjusting the lace on her dress, she still spoke and gesticulated violently. How different from the well-oiled tongue I had been accustomed to hear.

The first observation I caught was from her companion.

"I tell you, Charlotte, you don't understand the girl. Instead of coming round, she is more determined than ever. We must leave it to chance. Now you've got all *you* wanted, and our score is clear, Charlotte, I won't have you bully the girl; we must leave this marriage to time—and, perhaps, her affection for you."

"Mon Dieu, Percival, do you think I am a woman to be cheated by an impertinent

child like that? I have sacrificed 80,000 francs for you; shall I leave it to *chance* when I have the opportunity of getting it back, and more besides? Do you take me for a fool? She shall marry him, if my name is Charlotte Barrènes."

"With all my heart, if you can manage it peaceably; but I believe myself, knowing how devilish obstinate she is, that she'll sooner go into a convent, or go out as a governess—in short, disgrace herself in any way—rather than marry *le vieux*. And, as I told you before, I won't——"

"Bah! mon cher, you don't suppose I am going to beat this dear daughter of yours? She refused my hand just now, so I suppose it will be open war between us—and no one ever insulted me without suffering for it; but mine are *pattes de chat*, you know—I never show the claws but to *you*."

"And I suffer in proportion for your hypocrisy to the rest of the world. Understand me, Charlotte. I've done the poor child harm enough already—harm enough this very day, without——"

"Que veux-tu dire?" cried Madame, starting up, and her eyes flashing. "Ha! is this

your gratitude, Percival? Do you forget how often I have saved you from Clichy? Have I not singled *you* out from all others to heap my benefits upon? Have I not given up, for the last three years, the whole of my annuity from the Marquis to you? which you have gambled away every farthing of? And you talk to me of *harm*? I should like to know, too, who is to support you now, if I do not? Who has obtained for you the large loan from *le vieux*, upon which you are living? Truly, sir, you forget how much you are in my debt!"

"And you've exacted devilish heavy payment, Charlotte; but don't make a scene. We shall be having people in to see what is the matter, if you talk so loud. Of course, I am indebted to you, and very fond of you, and all the rest of it——"

"Ah! mon cher, nous avons passé par là. Let us talk about business, and not waste our time. The only thing I am afraid of, to tell you the truth, is *that Milord Rawdon*. He looks as if he were a desperate man in love—or in war!"

"She does not care for him. I am afraid of her running away to become governess or

companion—and the deuce of it is, I suppose the world would give it against me.”

“There are ways of obviating these little difficulties,” said Madame, with a sardonic smile I could see perfectly reflected in the glass. “C’est grand dommage, mais il court déjà des bruits—they do not take young girls of doubtful repute into families as governesses or companions. I shall be very sorry, but if she thwarts her own interests and your desires in this way, we must take steps to prevent it.”

“By G—d! Charlotte, this is really too bad. I believe you have already industriously circulated stories about the child, and”—(he swore a terrible oath, not to be rendered in English)—“if I find you using any foul means of that sort——”

“Bah! You have a poor idea of my intellect, Percival! Such stories would come ill from me; du reste, no one would believe them! There are other ways you men don’t understand. I should be the last person to have recourse to such extreme measures. Leave it all to me, mon ami.” She smoothed her Brussels lace flounces as she spoke, and pulled out the folds of her dress

behind, with as much care and attention as though she were not withering up my fair fame, and blasting my whole future in her heart of hearts.

A cold creeping horror seized me. I felt as if I must cry out: as if I could no longer assist at the revelation of this woman's appalling wickedness, without denouncing it, and calling down God's wrath to overtake her. I believe I almost expected to see her struck dead upon the spot. While I gasped and struggled to suppress the cry that rose choking in my throat, the speakers passed, and were sauntering on into the next room.

"Do you hear? Is that enough for you?" said the deep voice beside me. "This is but the beginning. Will you go back and form one of this respectable household?"

"Oh, horrible! What is to become of me? My own father—my wretched father! It was enough without this. What has he done? What is this bond he has entered into? I am in a thick darkness. I see nothing plainly."

"I thought you must know it already, Marguerite. Your father was *married to that woman this morning.*"

Rawdon caught me in his arms, or I should have fallen.

"Merciful God!" I murmured, "is this some frightful dream? Oh, my poor mother! to think of that woman—to call her—Oh! no, no! this is too bitter. It cannot be! It isn't true—say it isn't true. I feel—oh! Rawdon, Rawdon, take me away from her—hide me—kill me—do anything, only save me from that terrible woman!"

Thus I raved on. I thought then, and I think still, that I was very nearly insane. I had no control over my thoughts or words. All my brain was on fire, and Rawdon himself was alarmed at the state of excitement I was in.

"Come, dearest, let us fly from here. Calm yourself, dear Marguerite. Before you are missed, we shall be far away;" and he drew from his pocket a small taper, which he lit. The wick, as soon as it ignited, shot up a bright blue flame. He held it at the window-pane. A sudden rush of recollection came over me.

"Nó, no! not that—it cannot be. I didn't know what I was doing—I was mad.

If I said anything—forget it. It cannot be, Rawdon—leave me, if——”

“Never! I will not leave you now to your weaker self, Marguerite. I will take you from this hell, in spite of yourself. You shall bear my name, and as soon as you are my wife, and beyond the reach of these vile, defaming tongues, I will kill myself and rid you of my troublesome presence. You know as well as I that these are not mere words. I will do what I say if your happiness requires it. But it now requires that you should leave—I will not call it your *home*—your father’s house for ever. It is no longer a safe place for you.”

“Don’t say anything more—you see the state I am in—on the verge of madness. God help me! I no longer seem to see right from wrong. Only I know that I have nothing to give in return for this devotion. I cannot—ought not—don’t press me.”

“Enough. I am content that you *should* let me devote my life for you. Come, Madame will be sending soon to look for you in all directions. Remember, she has now *authority* to do so. Just think, if your life

has been miserable hitherto, what it will be henceforward under the same roof with that woman. Her influence with your father will be greater than ever. She has got from *him* all he had to give—his name! where-with she intends to get a footing in society, and being rich with the spoil of her former lovers—the Marquis alone allows her a large annuity—your father's interest will make him obedient to her wishes. You understand this notable plot now. Your father has married this woman, not that he any longer cares for her, but because he was enormously in her debt. Had you accepted the Marquis, your father hoped to have got off his own marriage, as the old man had promised to pay Madame and everything else. Now she and that old devil together have you in their power. You will be closely watched. Your little maid, because she is too true and faithful, is to be sent away. This, Marguerite, is your last chance of escape."

I was seized with a violent trembling.

"Why am I lingering here? She may be coming. There she is! I feel her hand

on me. Off! off! Keep her off, Rawdon."

"Come!"—and he gently drew my arm within his—"this way; I know another exit without going round."

Half-dragging, half-carrying me, he opened a door, and we descended a small stair, communicating with the vestibule below. A servant was waiting there with a large and heavy fur cloak and hood, in which I was enveloped. I had no longer any power of volition—mind and body were equally prostrate—I could not have crawled along the floor alone. We passed swiftly through the crowd of officers and lacqueys, and stepped out into the wild black night. How we threaded the labyrinth of carriages and dragoons I know not. The blast every now and then carried me off my feet. But for the strong arm round me, I should have fallen under the wheels and horses more than once.

At the corner of the bridge stood a carriage. There, too, lay the river, swelling turbulently along under the dark arches, and as I looked over the parapet, a horrible

suggestion crossed my mind. It was only an instant; but my companion guessed that thought, for he grasped me firmly by the arm, and led me to the carriage.

“ We are driving to your old home,” said he, seating himself beside me, “ for your maid must come with you. Tell her to put up a few things quickly. Every moment is valuable now.”

CHAPTER IX.

BETSY's face, when she opened the door, was flushed and swollen. She looked at me for a moment, and then sobbed out:

"You've heard it, miss? Oh! Lord, oh! Lord!"

"Hush! don't cry; we have no time for tears. Be quick!"

"But you don't know as they've sent me away—they won't let me stay with you. It's cruel, it's in'uman, it is. The Colonel was 'shamed to speak himself, so he writes it, with my wages, and as how I was to leave to-morrow! 'Services no longer required!' Services, indeed! ugh! ugh! and I——"

"Betsy, if you wish to remain with me, you must leave this house to-night—*now*—at once."

She stopped crying at once.

"Whatever do you mean, dear? Your eyes look awful wild. Why, you're not a-going——"

"But I am, Betsy. I am going to leave my father's house for ever. Don't desert me, dear old Betsy." And I threw my arms round her. She was in no frame of mind to combat my resolve.

"I'll go with you all the world over, my poor babby!"

In five minutes, with her usual quickness and energy, she had selected and put up some few necessary things. I would not wait even to change my gown. I did not give myself time to hesitate. The moment for deliberation was past.

I tottered with feeble steps into my mother's room. The faint light of the gas-lamps from the street dimly defined the white bed, and the forms of all the dear old furniture. I bade them, hallowed as they were by so many associations, a solemn and eternal farewell. It was the last link that held me to the past—the only relic that remained of my mother and my *home*. I turned: Betsy stood there with a couple of night-bags.

We stole down the stairs like thieves, though indeed there was nothing to hinder our exit, and crossed the court.

“Quick ! quick !” said Rawdon.

The carriage-steps were let down. He handed me and Betsy in, and jumped in after us ; the servant mounted the box. In another moment the old house—the well-known windows with their green shutters, the walls which had witnessed all the joys and sorrows of my life—had rolled by, and passed from me for ever.

I threw myself back into a corner of the carriage. Rawdon was silent. There was no sound save a frightened, stifled sob from Betsy in the opposite corner, and the rain which now began to descend in gusty splashes on the carriage-roof. Though the wind had somewhat abated, it now and then drove with such vehemence that the horses swerved across the road and threatened to overturn us.

At last we came to the *barrière*, where they examined our passport (which Rawdon had taken care to provide), and where our horses, already fagged by long exposure to the elements, were exchanged for four fresh

ones. This time, we made good way in spite of the storm. The long rows of poplars that gloomed spectrally on either side of the road under the flash of the carriage-lamps, sped rapidly by. The postilions cracked their whips defiantly, and urged the horses forward mile after mile of flat, straight road, plunging over the uneven pavement, the mud dashing impotently up against the windows. The rain began to descend with fury. The black heavens, from which shone no ray of moon or star, seemed emptying themselves in wrath around us. Truly an awful night!—a drive never to be forgotten!

For the raging of the storm without, reader, was as nothing compared to the scourging tempest within me. To the necessity for action, the maddened impulse, the momentary delirium, had succeeded complete inaction. And now, with ever-increasing intensity, an agony, a horror of my own self and of what I had done, seized me. There I sat, silent and motionless. Rawdon's large, firm hand held mine, and every now and then he turned to look into my face, on which the light of the carriage-

lamps fell; but with rare tact he forbore to speak, for he knew what a wrench my whole system had sustained. And I commanded back the hot and bitter tears that rushed to my eyes, as I drove along through the darkness beside one whom I must henceforward study and consider, though I could never love; for my whole heart and thoughts, alas! still belonged to another. The inward voice, that is not to be stilled in such an hour as this, cried aloud, "Thou art about to perjure thine own soul!" Was it all to end thus, that vow registered in secret long ago?—The words seemed burnt into the air; I could not hide them; there they stood written on the darkness in characters of fire.

The wind had dropped altogether. Nothing was to be heard but the rain tearing up the road on either side. Heaven seemed holding its breath, and then, suddenly, from its mouth emitted a sharp tongue of fire. The vivid flash quivered through the carriage, and Betsy's scream was drowned in the thunder-clap which broke instantaneously over us.

"The horses are beginning to flag, Raw-

don. Where do we stop?—we can't go on much longer."

"We change horses very soon. We don't stop till we get to Amiens, where there is an English clergyman. We shall be there very early. No time is to be lost till then—until that final step is taken. After it," he added, in a whisper, "we will idle on the road as you will—when the door is well fastened between you—between *us* and the rest of the world."

I leaned back, sick and weary.

I did not forget the fate I had escaped—oh, no! I did not forget that here was a noble and true heart—the only one devoted to me in all the world, and over which I should possess large influence for good. Some, therefore, would justify—some even rejoice—at the course I had taken, though many, again, would mouth, and moan, and shake their heads. But what mattered it what they all thought? Praise or blame were to me alike indifferent. How much of the reality did any of them know of what was passing below the surface of the complexity of passions that stirred the very deeps of my being? Ah! it was truly

said, "C'est dans les profondeurs de l'invisible que se passent les événements heureux ou malheureux de la vie!"* I did not think of what the world would say. I only listened to my own heart's fierce and bitter upbraiding.

A church clock struck four. The cracking of whips and the redoubled efforts of the horses announced that we were entering a village. Presently we drove up to the post-house, the only house in the street where a light still burned in the window. A poor place enough; but as the door opened, and I saw the wood fire blazing on the kitchen-hearth, it looked like "home." There was a crib with a child in it, near which a woman sat. It recalled my little brothers, who would have no one now, when they came from school, to stand between them and their father's coldness and neglect. How had I acted on my mother's dying injunction as regarded them? It was morbid self-reproach, for had I been leaving home under happier circumstances, the poor boys would have been left no less unfriended. But there are states of mind in which we

* Victor Cousin.

seem to try and aggravate our misery by heaping fuel on the fire. It was so with me.

There came another woman out with a lantern, and thrust it up under the carriage window, asking if we would have some coffee. Then followed a good deal of shrill swearing, and clatter of hoof and harness, but the fresh horses were already put to, and no time lost. The last thing I saw was the old postilion, inside the kitchen, dripping at every tassel, and regaling himself with a *petit verre* at the hands of the lanterned lady. Then again we plunge into the darkness, with nothing but the elf lights and shadows we bring with us dancing along upon cottage walls, and apple-trees, and long reaches of flat land.

The fury of the storm was over, and in half an hour after, spite of the excitements of that night, nature and habit proved too strong for Betsy, and she fell asleep. How I envied her, honest creature, as she lay snoring in the corner opposite. Oh, that I could only sleep and forget it all, and never, never wake again ! Rawdon's eyes gleamed on me out of the deep shadow with such

woeful, passionate expression, that my heart smote me as I thought how often, in the long years to come, I should find that same look bent on me—that silent, touching rebuke so impossible to answer.

This longest night in my life is drawing to an end. We have changed horses twice again, and now the dawn is breaking in a pale and misty light. The rain and wind have alike died away, and the sobbing of wet leaves and branches, and the flutter of an awakening bird, are the only sounds. The sky is heaving peacefully, as a child that sleeps after a turbulent passion of tears, while the robe of night drops gently off. A rook wheeling its flight above the brown fields is defined darkly against the glimmering grey. A cock crows his reveille in a farm-yard as we pass, and the peasant, in his blue blouse, is already yoking his oxen to the plough.

The reign of darkness and of dreams—of crime and mystery—was past. The hour was come when terrors take a real shape, or fade into vain shadows, that have but disquieted the heart for a while. What was past was no phantasmagoria of the brain. I

was here in the body: it was a terrible reality defined in the hard steel-light of day.

The sun is up, and we are entering Amiens. I see its cathedral tower in a blue mist—but, indeed, everything passes in a mist before my eyes: the faces of the houses thrust close to us as we crash along the narrow streets; the market, with its scarlet umbrellas, white handkerchiefs, and green and purple vegetable-baskets—things my strong natural habit of observation alone forces me to see at this moment. They present themselves like shapes in a kaleidoscope, only seen through a gauzy film.

We drive into the inn-yard with a flourish of horn and whip. A great bell rings, and the landlord, in a velvet cap, backed by a chorus of waiters, cringes forward. The carriage-steps are let down: Rawdon springs out. I try to move, but all my limbs seem as if they were of lead. Rawdon lifts me gently out, but I have scarcely set my foot to the ground when I reel forwards, and lose further consciousness in his arms.

CHAPTER X.

I OPENED my eyes in a spacious, raw-looking room, the walls of which represented the adventures of Telemachus in progressive order; the figures nearly life-size, painted in the brightest body-colours. A pile of damp wood seethed and spluttered on the hearth. Upon the marble chimney-piece stood a huge ormolu clock; a secrétaire, a table, and a few hard chairs, formed the only furniture of the apartment. The cold was intense. Rawdon and Betsy stood beside me, and the landlord, cap in hand, was near the door. I suppose Rawdon had been remonstrating, in no gentle terms, on the discomfort of the room, for the former was assuring him, in a deprecatory tone, that he was *désolé*. His best rooms—his rooms to the front—were occupied; had been already engaged before milord's avant-courier arrived. *Du reste,*

the rooms were convenient—milord's on one side of the *salon*, miladi's on the other. Did milord propose remaining in Amiens that night? He would find the *cuisine* excellent.

"No, certainly not—probably not. Where does the English clergyman live?"

"A little outside the town—une petite demi-heure—would milord like some one to show him the way?"

"Yes, directly; and send up some breakfast at once. Marguerite, my beloved, I must leave you here for an hour in Betsy's charge. Remain quiet till I return, and lie down; you are exhausted. Betsy will bring you your breakfast."

"I want nothing but perfect rest—not food, but rest. I shall be better when you come back. You will bring the clergyman with you?" I added, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Betsy, go and get something to eat, my good creature; do not mind me. I am better alone."

"Lock the door, then," said Rawdon; and when Betsy had left the room, he took my cold hands in his, and looked into my face. Ah! such a look as I can never forget.

"I feel a dread at leaving you, dearest, even for an hour, but I cannot help it—a dread of something unforeseen stepping in between my happiness and me. I struggled *against* it so long, and since that I have struggled *for* it so long, I can hardly believe in its realisation now. God bless you, my Marguerite, my own bride elect! I can pray now, you see—that is the first step you have worked in my reform."

He hurriedly pressed his burning lips to my forehead, then strode towards the door. He turned back for one farewell look. "God forgive you and me!" I muttered, with averted face. They were the only words my lips would frame. When I looked up, he was gone. I dragged my feeble steps after him, and drew the bolt of the door.

Then, at length, I was *alone*.

I breathed a long, deep breath. Though only for a brief space, this liberty was as an opened window to one gasping for air. No need to choke back the tears—to repress the agonised cry of my heart. Not an eye could see me. I threw myself on my knees and sobbed aloud. And then, for the second time, perhaps, in my life, I poured out my

whole soul to God. It was one of those moments "when the soul is left passive and helpless, gazing face to face upon the anticipated and dreadful moment, which is slowly moving on:" when, finding "ourselves powerless, as in the hands of a destiny, there comes that horrible feeling of insecurity which forces us to feel out into the abyss for something that is mightier than flesh and blood to lean upon."* I prayed as the shipwrecked do—as men do in all cases when human aid is unavailing. O God! was there no turning back? no door of escape possible—anything, anything but this?

Yet I rose from my knees calmer, and, in some sense, stronger. My way was dark, indeed, but when the soul lights the way the understanding must see clearer to follow. I walked slowly up and down the chamber, revolving in my mind how it were possible——The clergyman? Yes, that was the first step. I must see him alone, and tell him all. I must brace my coward heart to meet Rawdon, and show him, even at the eleventh hour, that this must not be. I would implore the clergyman to find me

* Robertson.

some means of working for my daily bread, here, in this town. I could never return home, of course; but was not this even a worse thralldom? I was about to bind the fetters on my *soul* which no tyranny could fasten on. They might deprive me of all that is most precious in life, friends and fair fame, but I should still have that which was dearer to me than all. We women think of these things so differently! To me, the prospect of sitting down for life beside one whose presence never made my heart hurry one beat faster—to whose thought my own never sprang up responsive—from whose tenderness I shrank back,—in short, to give only one half of myself, while the other was turned to stone, this was a life-solitude compared with which almost any other fate, which I might *voluntarily accept*, would be preferable.

I had approached the window, and, almost unconsciously, stood looking down into the court-yard below. There stood the *berline* which brought us, covered with mud; and there, too, a dark travelling-chariot, ready packed, and upon which a servant was strapping some night-bags, assisted by the

ostler. A lady's-maid, carrying a parrot, came down, and the cage was hoisted on an imperial. Then followed dressing-cases, air-cushions, a medicine-chest, and sundry books. An old gentleman now appeared, who walked carefully round the carriage, examining the axles and fingering the springs: no strap or buckle escaped him, I am sure. Then he went up to the *berline* (his hands were now behind his coat-tails), and inspected the small coronet and arms on the panel with minute attention. I watched the old gentleman's movements with growing curiosity. Surely I had seen him before, somewhere? So I had many hundred faces in Paris. What then? Better not see these. Nevertheless, if I could but remember where I had seen him! The broad-brimmed hat (I seemed to recognise even *that*) concealed the eyes. He looked up, and it all flashed upon me at once. The garden at Grandregard—the sick lady and her devoted brother—yes, it was certainly Mr. Bissett.

Was this the answer to my prayer, pointing to a door of delivery? I ran to the bell, and pulled it violently. I unlocked the door,

and met the astonished waiter in the passage.

"Where is the English family who slept here last night?"

"They are just leaving, madame."

"Where is their room? Quick."

"Number 2—there, at the end of the passage."

"Go and say that an English lady desires to speak with them instantly."

I waited trembling in the corridor. The man knocked. I heard a soft voice say, "Entrez." The man went in, and gave his message. Then followed two or three questions from Mr. and Miss Bissett alternately. Then a slight altercation.

"My love, you had much better send out to say you are sorry, but you are just starting, and haven't time."

"My dear, the horses are not put to yet, and it may be something, you know, in which one could be of use, and really in a foreign land—Demandez à la dame de entrer."

I stood in the doorway. Miss Bissett sat at breakfast; the same little brown curls and tidy arrangement of the whole person.

"Do you remember Marguerite Percival, Miss Bissett?"

She dropped the piece of toast. "Good gracious! Why, of course!"

"Bless me!" said Mr. Bissett. "This is curious! quite a coincidence. Who would have thought of our meeting here, my dear young lady?"

"And we've so often talked of you, haven't we, brother?"

"Thank you; I'm glad you remember me. It makes my task easier. Oh! Miss Bissett, I hardly know how to begin what I have to say."

"Why, dear Miss Percival, what is the matter? You look dreadfully pale—not ill, I hope?"

"No, no, not ill; but I must explain to you how I came to be here. I am a stranger to you both—you know nothing of me. How shall I induce you to believe the truth of a very improbable story?"

The brother and sister looked at each other in mild wonderment. All their customary conventions of kind phrase were baffled. I told as rapidly and concisely as I

could so much of the past as was necessary to understand the strait I now stood in.

“My conduct seems inexplicable to you. It must; for it is almost inexplicable to myself. I have fled from my home with a man I do not love—whose wife I never ought to be. I know it must shock all your ideas of propriety, but do not, Miss Bissett—*do* not condemn me too severely. You don’t know what it is to be goaded, driven to desperation—what a life of constant terror and humiliation will do in the end. But I have awoken from this fearful dream before it is too late, I hope. I come to you as one Christian woman to another, and implore you, on my knees, to save me. Take me to some convent or house of refuge here; do anything to save me from this. I am strong and have energy, though you see me now so weak and unhinged. There is nothing—no work I will not do, to escape from my present position. But alone, I cannot break this chain. Of course I must be married *at once*, or leave him. I dread my own power of resisting his passionate, energetic remonstrance, if we meet again. Even the

clergyman will, perhaps, side with him, or urge my returning home, and *that* is impossible—quite impossible. My only hope is in you. For God's sake help me!"

The brother and sister again exchanged looks, and Miss Bissett, beckoning to her brother, walked to the window. A few minutes' whispered consultation followed (and I am bound to add, apparently no contradiction). Then they came forward, their kind faces beaming with satisfaction.

"As to your remaining here, my dear young lady, in a Roman Catholic establishment, or anything of that sort, with the risk of becoming a Papist, it is out of the question. We couldn't lend ourselves to it. My brother has strong Protestant principles. It is very shocking that you can't go home—very sad indeed. Do you feel really quite determined in your own mind that it is impossible?"

My heart sank within me during this speech. I shook my head resolutely.

"Well, we will hope that it will only be a temporary absence. In the mean while, my brother has thought of a plan" (it was

she, I know, but this was her way), "which will be the safest and most respectable thing you can do, I think. We will take you with us to England. There is plenty of room in our large chariot, if you don't mind going bodkin. And then, when we get to London, you know, we can think of something. You said you had a sister married, I believe? Well, at all events, the great thing is to get you away safely and quietly. A terrible piece of business, really! If we can start before the gentleman returns, so much the better—it will prevent a scene. Don't cry, my dear Miss Percival, please don't—it makes me nervous; and don't thank me, there's nothing to thank me for. It can be no trouble or inconvenience to anybody, but quite a pleasure to brother and self to have you with us."

As I recal, at this hour, the unutterable relief, the thanksgiving of my heart to God, at that moment, something of the same deep and solemn feeling of gratitude wells up within me. What would my subsequent life have been but for that window overlooking the court-yard!

My eyes were brimming over. I could not speak. I threw myself on my knees, and buried my head in her lap.

"No, no, my dear, pray don't; there is no time to be lost. You've got a maid, haven't you? There, now, calm yourself, my dear. Well, she can go in the rumble with Sarah, and John will mount on the box."

"My love, it would be much better if Sarah were to mount on the box and John go in the rumble, because then he can keep an eye to see that no ill-disposed person (shocking scoundrels, these foreigners) cuts off my hat-box, or——"

"My dear, it's perfectly impossible. Nothing would induce Sarah to give up her place in the rumble. Sarah must not be disturbed. *Any* other arrangement you please to make but that. Now, Miss Percival, if you wish to write, as I suppose, here are pens and paper. I will go and speak to your maid, and see that your things are moved into our carriage."

I hurriedly wrote two notes, which, as far as I can remember, ran somewhat as follows :

“Forgive me, Rawdon; do not curse me when you read this. Your prognostication has come true. I fly from you, even at the hour of our marriage, because what I suffered last night shows me with fearful distinctness that life would be a long martyrdom to us both if we were married.

“In a moment of delirium I consented to accompany you: I alone am to blame. You have shown yourself all that is noble and devoted: be still more so; do not follow or attempt to trace me: in short, try and forget my existence from this hour. You have repeated several times that you would sacrifice yourself for my happiness, and I ask that sacrifice of you in this way. It is the last request I shall ever make you in this world. Return to Paris with all possible speed; let my father have the enclosed note; and refute as soon as possible, by your presence in public, the rumour that will connect your absence with my flight.

“A kind family, known to me, who are in this hotel, have offered to take me to England. There I shall gain an honest independence somehow, and in this independ-

ence I shall be happy, Rawdon—as happy as I can ever be again. This should not displease you. Believe me, we never could have been happy together. You deserve a better fate ; and that you may find it, shall be my earnest prayer. Above all, let not my life, which has been sufficiently unhappy already, carry to its grave the bitter thought that it leaves you a more desperate man than when we crossed each other's path a year ago—readier to drown in dissipation the better instincts of your nature.

“God bless you. I have no heart to say more.

“MARGUERITE.”

Enclosed were these lines to my father :

“Your own heart will have told you why I left home, father. But it is my duty to let you know where and with whom I am, as well as my unalterable determination for the future. When you receive this, I shall be far on my road to England, under the protection of my excellent friends, Mr. and Miss Bissett. On my arrival in London, my future course will be guided by circumstances, but at all events you will, henceforward, be re-

lieved from the burden of my support, as well as from the restraint of my presence. I shall inform you when my plans are more formed. At present, my feelings are too painful and bitter to allow me to write more."

By the time I had finished, Miss Bissett was standing in nervous impatience beside me. Already had her brother twice announced that the horses were put to. He was too anxious to be off, to dispute the bill, as he generally did. Betsy's face, bewildered with the rapidity and unexpectedness of this last move, not knowing "whether she stood on her head or her heels," but strongly disposed to remonstrate with me, presented itself at the door. Behind her stood Rawdon's confidential servant, and the gaunt courier who had preceded us. I believe there was a suspicion on the minds of all three that compulsion, or at least energetic persuasion, had been used with me, and the two latter looked as if they were disposed to offer every resistance to my departure. I saw it was necessary at once to speak.

"Give this letter to your master," said I, stepping up to the servant, "and tell him that I left this of my own free will, in company with this lady and gentleman."

"Nous allons nous en aller," said Mr. Bissett, as he gave me his arm, and conducted me to the carriage. The tale having got wind, a couple of *sergents de ville* were at the door to witness my departure, backed by chambermaids, ostlers, and scullions.

First the sister steps in, then I, then Mr. Bissett. The parrot screams "Bonjour" from his cage on the imperial, and we slowly emerge from the shadow of the great archway. We are actually off. Brother and sister lean back with a long-drawn breath of relief.

Farewell, Amiens! I have never seen you since. Years have elapsed, but even now it would be painful to me to revisit the scene where I passed those few hours of my life.

CHAPTER XI.

THE train from Dover brought us into London late on Saturday evening. We drove to a private hotel in Dover-street.

As I looked out of window the following morning, my infantine impressions of the metropolis revived within me. A gloomier prospect it would be difficult to see. Outside our windows, upon a rickety iron balcony (never intended for any one to stand on), were three cypresses, like mementos *mori*, in funereal pots or urns: ghastly reminiscences of departed greenness in pleasant gardens, that beheld the rise and set of sun. Flakes of soot were encrusted in their close branches: they were petrified trees, standing for years past, probably, as they now stood, stoical and grim, heedless alike of winter snows that melted from the roof upon thin blackened tops, and blistering summer rays that peeled

the stucco from the wall. The face of the houses opposite was begrimed with thick tears of dirt. They seemed weeping their melancholy condition, as though they felt that seven dippings in the Jordan would be required to wash away their uncleanness. Upon one of these houses was what in my ignorance I took for the painted sign of a warehouse or shop. When Mr. Bissett informed me, at breakfast, it was a hatchment, the association of ideas did not enliven the character of the view.

The only living things that presented themselves for a long time, were a housemaid sweeping down the steps of a door, and a cat peering through the area-railings. The only sound, a bell tolling dismally from a neighbouring church. I checked a sense of depression I felt at the cheerless aspect of the great city in which my life would probably henceforward be passed. I had gone through too much not to be thankful for freedom alone, and comparatively indifferent to everything else. I would not disquiet myself about the future beforehand. The kindness of Mr. and Miss Bissett prevented my feeling that I was indeed *already* alone

in the world. To-morrow the fight must begin in earnest.

I must mention that at Calais a messenger had overtaken us from Rawdon. I do not give his letter, though I have it before me, and shall always keep it. In spite of the despair it breathed, there was a manly and noble spirit throughout. He saw, at length, that fate was against him—it was no use; but far from regretting the past, he rejoiced in it, as it had liberated me, though I had dashed aside the cup of happiness for ever, just as he had raised it to his lips. The latter part of the letter, which he had evidently tried to make as calm as possible, was much blotted and erased. Knowing his wild, passionate nature so well, I felt what it must have cost him to write thus. He said his life henceforward—which he prayed to God might not be long—should be more worthy of the only pure love he had known; and that he would do as I requested, by returning to Paris at once, &c. There was no resentment, no reproach; but so much the more did the tears blind me as I read it.

Mr. Bissett, standing before the fire and rubbing his hands after breakfast, said,

“Where shall we take Miss Percival to church, my dear—St. Paul’s, or Westminster Abbey? Sound doctrine at Westminster Abbey, ain’t it, my love? Or the Temple—what do you say to that? We must show you some of the sights before we leave—we shall only be here two days, you know. By-the-by—hem—hem——”

“I hardly know whether it is right to discuss business on Sunday, but—hem—hem—brother and I have been talking over your plans—and—it struck brother that the best thing you can do is to come and spend a month down with us in the country.”

“Until your sister and her husband return to England. You wrote to them, I think, from Dover? Well, that will give you time to look about you. As to remaining here in a lodging, my dear young lady, and consulting those trustees you talked of, and so on—why, you know, lawyers—confounded rascals!—never did any one any good, and you’d much better see some of your friends, or, at all events, hear from them, before you do anything decided.”

“Dear Mr. Bissett, what can I say? I thank you both from my heart, I am sure,

but I think it is better I should at once set about looking for some employment. It must be done; so the sooner the better, for I never will live on my brother-in-law's bounty, or any one else's, if I can help it. I am afraid you think that wicked pride, Miss Bissett, for you shake your head. My sister had not a penny when she married—is it fair to lay an additional burden on her husband? If I could be of use to her, it would be different, but I should be only in their way. They have no children, as yet, whom I could teach, and I should be a kill-joy in their gay existence. Believe me it is so: I have thought over it much. I had better set bravely to work at once; nothing like hard work for making one contented, is there?"

"No, no, my dear; it is all very creditable, your wish to be independent, and I am sure we honour it exceedingly, but you really require *rest* for some time. Your nerves have been shaken—you don't look as a young girl should. Your energies will be all the better for lying by. And the spring, as I always say, is such a very trying season!"

"Lord! you don't know what spring in the country is, Miss Percival! The finest sight in the year to see all the hedges bursting, and the lambs sporting in the fields, and the wheat sprouting up thick!—a sight you can't see in that land of *Mounseers* you've lived in. I never saw such farmers; it's my belief they only know how to cultivate frogs!"

"Brother, you carry your English prejudices to a ridiculous extent, as I often tell you. Besides, young ladies don't care about farming. But I flatter myself, Miss Percival, that we can show you as sweet spots near us as are to be found in England. The Peak is not many miles distant. You've read "Peveril?" With your artistic eye (you said you were so fond of drawing) you would find plenty of food for your pencil—if you don't think you would be bored with our very quiet, humdrum life."

"Please don't say that. It sounds as if you thought my foreign education had unfitted me for a quiet English life. I have never tried it, but I can fancy nothing happier."

"Come and judge for yourself," said Mr.

Bissett. And they succeeded, at last, in persuading me to accept their kind invitation.

I wrote to Miss Lateward the following day (Sunday being devoted to two churches and the Park). It was, for many reasons, a difficult and unpleasant task, and I made it as short as I could. I begged her to spare me any advice about returning home. I told her I was with friends, and had consented to pass some weeks in the country with them before returning to London, where I intended commencing my career as an artist. I concluded by saying,

“Be good enough not to name me, nor allude to this letter or its contents, among your circle. You will oblige me greatly by attending to my wishes in this respect. I have suffered much, and I had rather, henceforward, be completely forgotten — never spoken of, nor canvassed in any way. I have no desire, now, but to drop down the stream unobserved—to glide as quietly as possible onward to that peaceful sea towards which we are all hastening.”

During the days we stayed in London, desirous of raising the British character in my eyes, Mr. Bissett kindly wished to take

me to every sight the capital afforded at that season. I lived in hourly apprehension of museums and zoological gardens. Fortunately, his sister saw how ill-disposed my thoughts and spirits were to answer these active calls. Many were the amiable bickerings on the subject I overheard; but it ended generally in my being left quiet. Mr. Bissett (notwithstanding his abuse of the profession) had to see his lawyer in Lincoln's Inn, and Miss Bissett her doctor. Then there was an old aunt in the Regent's Park to be visited, and sundry purchases to be made, such as garden-seeds, and books for the school-children, besides presents from the Soho Bazaar for all the members of the Exton household; so that the time of both brother and sister was pretty well employed, and in a delightful and pleasurable fidget they both lived.

I called at Sir Charles Murray's, in Brook-street. He was in Suffolk. Mr. and Mrs. Murray were not expected home till the beginning of May—nearly two months hence. The only visit I paid was to my brothers, who were at school near London. Their joy at the unexpected sight of me was the

cheeriest thing I had met since I landed in England. But it was painful having to break to them a knowledge of the changes that had taken place in their home since they left it six weeks before. I said that as our father was married again, I was come to live near them and Rose. I dared promise they would spend their summer holidays with her in the country, if they were good and worked hard. I was leaving London, but they must write to me very often, and I should be back before long, and then we would spend a long half-holiday together somewhere.

“Perhaps Greenwich, where the old sailors are?” suggested Roger.

As we returned in the cab along the Strand, and I looked down some of the dark and narrow streets that lead to the river, I thought how it was possible I might soon be a dweller in one of those dismal houses. I pictured myself on a hot summer's evening looking out of a second-floor window, while wherries on the river bore holiday-folk to pleasant gardens far away, and an organ in the street below played old tunes, full of memories of the long ago!

I was to begin existence anew. New scenes and faces—new interests and aims. Only no new hopes: they were buried with the old life. Or, at most, one arose, of doing some small good in my generation—that my life should not be confined to a round of selfish toils—that I might find some work beyond the daily task for bread apportioned for me to do.

Sitting in the grim London room, upon a black horsehair sofa, with the *Times* supplement in my hand, my eye resting vacantly on paragraphs beginning, "Landscape-painting: six lessons for one guinea," &c.; "Pictures and sketches for sale," my thoughts too often strayed from the practical questions I had sat down to consider. The mind is a strange sensitive plant. It answers to touches of which we are scarcely conscious. When we fancy our attention fixed, a chance word is enough to unloose a whole chain of thoughts, and send them wandering up and down the face of the earth. He is a wise and a happy man who can say he has absolute control over his restive imagination. I found, to my sorrow, at this time, how little I had over mine. I was constantly referring

my motives and actions to *his* standard—asking myself what *he* would have thought on such and such a point; though I struggled very hard to forget his existence, and tried to think I did so.

The night before we left London, I told Betsy it was probable that I should be returning in a few weeks' time to take up my abode in some small lodging, and I begged her to say honestly if she still wished to remain with me under these circumstances—whether she had no desire to “better” herself, or, perhaps, to return abroad? She had been spending the day with a cousin in Long Acre, and declared that she was sick of *foreign* parts. She would stick by me, *that* she would, so long as I were a lone child, the which, however, she foresaw, would not be long. Though I *had* disappointed his lordship—and a great pity, too, *she* thought, for he was a fine gentleman, and spent his money like one; and that, for herself, if she ever was to marry, for sure it were like time, when I were settled, and there were those, perhaps, as *would*—However, she shouldn't more particularly delude to that, for it was neither here nor

there. Putting these things together, had my palm been crossed with silver, I should confidently have predicted matrimony on the Long Acre horizon.

We started by an early train next day. About three in the afternoon, Mr. Bissett, suddenly starting up and rubbing his eyes, announced that we were not far from the station where we were to get out. Whereupon, a folding up of shawls and dispersion of the crumbs of sandwich lodged in fold and flounce.

"Fine land this, eh? Very fine land, Miss Percival?" Mr. Bissett has been in the land of dreams for the last hour, but it is not of this land he speaks. "To think of those confounded fellows wanting to give us free trade, when one looks *there*! It will be the ruin of England if Peel ever succeeds."

"Sir," said a plethoric man, with "cotton" written all over him, who had not yet spoken, "you should look at the question from a broad point of view. A long-sighted policy——"

"Don't talk to me of long sight, sir. I have long enough sight to see those fields.

I say, that you will bring down the farmer to the level of his labourer. It's the beginning of Socialism, sir. You'll have England just as bad as France."

"In the present day," said the free-trader, with a sarcastic manner, "the greatest good of the greatest number is supposed to be the aim of legislation, not the greatest good of a very small number, which the farmers are. If, by the cheapening of bread, you better the condition——"

"Nonsense, sir! I beg your pardon, but you make me angry. How are the labourers to get employment—how are they to buy bread *at all*, if it is not from the farmers? And how can the farmers afford to pay them when there is such a monstrous competition in the market? I say, it's impossible, sir."

"Nay, then the fields must lie uncultivated," said the other, with a smile. "But you will find things don't quite come to that pass, though we *shall* have free trade as sure as I sit here, sir. You will find that the only difference is, that your farmers, instead of sending their oats *only* to Anchester (you live near there, if I am not mistaken, sir?), will——"

"Anchester?" said I, turning to Miss Bissett (and from this point I lost the Protectionist discourse). "Are there two Anchesters? I thought it was in ——shire?"

"So it is—on the borders: but yet it is only fifteen miles from us. Why do you ask? Do you know any one there?"

"No—that is, I believe an old governess of mine is living with a family not far from there. That is the post town, at least."

"What is the name of the family?"

"Rochford."

"Oh yes! They are the other side of Anchester. I don't know them much myself, but brother does. He meets Mr. Rochford on the grand jury, and so on; but they live much too far for visiting acquaintance."

"Oh!" A long-drawn breath of relief.

"But their cousins, the Nevilles, are our near neighbours. I have seen Mr. Rochford there. It was thought at one time he would marry Maud Neville. She is a great favourite of mine—such a nice girl! Since we've been abroad, I have heard nothing more of it; but, indeed, I am quite behind-

hand in county news. I believe I must have lost some of dear Mrs. Deane's letters."

What would I not have given to return to London by the next train! Had I but known this, nothing in the world should have tempted me down here. While Miss Bissett ran on about Mrs. Deane, and a thousand other indifferent things, my visit to Exton was being prospectively curtailed to days instead of weeks.

I asked carelessly what the Neville family consisted of.

"There is the father, Mr. Neville, who is reckoned a clever person. He has written a book. He has one son—a young man at Oxford, who is, in the slang of the day, what you call rather *fast*. Maud is his only other child, so she will have a large fortune. Her mother was an heiress, sister of Mrs. Rochford's. She died only two years ago, poor thing! She was devoted to her daughter, and took great pains with her education. Mr. Neville did, too; though, somehow, I never can fancy he is as clever as they say. He *has* written a book though (something too learned for me, however).

Little Maud and I are great friends. I call her little, though she's a big girl, but having known her since she was——"

"Come, come, my love, don't sit there talking; here we are! Quick, now—that basket. Miss Percival, take these shawls, please. Good day to you, sir. I hope we may *never* see your free trade in England—that's all."

It was dark as we drove down the narrow lane that led to Exton. I leant forward and said,

"Mr. Bissett, I have a singular request to make to you. You are so open and straightforward, that I hardly know whether you will grant it. During the short time—for it must be a very short time—I am with you, I have most urgent reasons for wishing to remain unnoticed — *unknown* — in your house."

"But, my dear Miss Percival, nothing is more natural. God bless my soul! worried and plagued to death as you seem to have been—and I dare say I don't know half—you, of course, want to be quiet. You needn't be alarmed; we *are* very quiet; we've hardly any visitors, and you needn't

see *them*, if you don't like. My house is Liberty Hall."

"Dear Mr. Bissett, there are reasons that I cannot enter into exactly, why I am very anxious my name should not be known in your neighbourhood. I assure you there is no terrible secret under this mystery—it is only a matter of feeling—of false delicacy, perhaps ; but I dislike its being talked of, that I am staying in this particular part of the country. Do you mind calling me by any other name?"

I do not think Mr. Bissett at all relished the idea. A change of name was connected in his mind with the magisterial bench, swindling, and the county gaol. It was "such a very odd thing"—he had never heard of such a thing—except—really—well, if it was particularly to oblige me—for Miss Bissett was nodding and winking significantly at her brother all the time, and those cabalistic signs he never long resisted. She, I believe, would have acceded to any proposition of mine, for I was beginning to have a great ascendancy over her.

So it was settled that I entered Exton as Miss Hope.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a long, low house, with a homely English face, and pleasant irregular features: bay-windows, trellised porch, and conservatory. The evergreens, which shut it in on two sides, were of the most luxuriant growth, such as one never sees in France; sweeping the gravel with their broad-leaved branches, and forming an emerald wall nearly as high as the roof. The greenest of velvet lawns, brocaded in knots of flowers, sloped down to a clear stream: on the other side of which the pleasure-grounds extended for some distance—Mr. Bissett would never allow it to be called a park—with a large farm beyond.

I looked from my window, the morning after my arrival, on that happy home-picture: the lawn, glistening under its veil of dew, the

rooks cawing in the bare top branches, the partridges freckling the farm-fields, and the blue ridges of the hills behind. Under the wide-armed elms, whose trunks, with all their moss-enamellings, lay clearly mirrored in the shallow water, the sheep and cattle were come to drink; the only sound of human life was the gardener's scythe upon the lawn, and that in no way disturbed the sense of peace and repose that came over me as I stood there.

Of course the brother and sister found enough to do after their year's absence from home, to enable me to be many hours of the day alone, and these I spent mostly in the library. A fire was lit there once a week, nominally to keep the books dry; but the south sun fell full into this room, otherwise it would have been untenably chill and damp. A mouldy smell of books struck on one as one opened the door. I took down volumes from the topmost shelves, that, save by the housemaid's broom, had probably not been touched for years. The leaves clung together from long companionship in damp: for, excepting the works of Mrs. Hannah More, I do not think Miss Bissett was much

given to literature, and her brother certainly never read anything but the newspaper, the Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer. Here I spent some very happy mornings : here I made acquaintance with many of the treasured classics of our language, hitherto only known to me by name—the courtly verse of Pope, the polished prose of Addison and Steele. In such company I often forgot the anxieties of the present, and the tranquillising effect of this life was very beneficial to my health and spirits. The family at Neville Hall were from home ; and as my assumed name prevented any rumour of my being here from reaching Rochford Court, where all the party were assembled, I was comparatively at ease ; though I still determined only to remain at Exton a fortnight.

The approaching marriage was, of course, the first piece of news Mrs. Deane, the clergyman's wife, had to communicate to her dear friend Miss Bissett. I was obliged to make Mrs. Deane's acquaintance, notwithstanding my request to be allowed to slip away unnoticed when any visitors were announced : but it would have been impossible to escape this lady, for she popped in and

out, at all hours of the day ; at breakfast, at luncheon—no hour, or meal, or room was sacred. An active, benevolent, shrewd, inquisitive woman, invariably seen, with a basket or a bundle, trudging to and fro in all weathers ; indefatigable in her charities, which were no cold matter of duty with her ; a patient listener and judicious counsellor ; a right good gossip (which, in a genial sense, is a most commendable village weakness) ; a warm, comfortable body, in short, inexhaustibly supplied with the caloric of human sympathy. She was the dispenser of Miss Bissett's charities during the absence of the latter, and her prime minister when at home. This accounted for her constant little dartings in and out of the house, charged with flannel petticoats and cordials. I hardly ever crossed the hall without finding her rubbing her feet on the mat, in a glow of benevolence and sharp walking ; or taking her departure with a cobwebbed black bottle protruding from her basket. Our acquaintance progressed rapidly. At first, indeed, I found her rather disagreeably curious to know where I came from, who my parents were, how I came to know Miss

Bissett, whether I was related to the Hopes of Shropshire, &c. &c. But we got on together capitally, when she had satisfied herself that I was a "young person" whom Miss Bissett had met at T——, that I had no family, no home, and that I intended earning my livelihood as an artist, in London. My kind hosts had laid injunctions on their two faithful old servants to say nothing about me whatever; and, to their honour be it spoken, they never yielded to the strong temptation of a strange tale to tell "in strict confidence" to all their village friends. The possession of this secret, and their having travelled in foreign parts together, tended greatly to their intimacy with my Betsy. This triumvir of the "upper table," as I learnt from her, had a sort of freemasonry between them, and their often ambiguous talk inspired the others with great awe.

Of Mr. Deane, I have little to say. He was a character of secondary importance in the village: a good man, but dull and slow. I often wondered how his sharp, active wife could resist slipping on the surplice, and taking his place in the reading-desk. For in every other emergency, even to the delivery

of a slow joke at dinner, she came to his rescue, and carried him briskly through it. But in church he always sent his congregation to sleep.

Ten days had passed ; I was beginning to feel as if I had spent all my life at Exton, and to look forward to leaving it with great regret. I sat in the library window one morning, a book on my knee, thinking how I should broach the subject of my departure to Miss Bissett, when, on looking up, I saw her standing on the terrace, talking to a young lady in a riding-dress. The latter, with one hand, held up the long habit from her feet, while she pointed with the other to some flowers. Not a look or gesture, not a fold of the cloth escaped me ; immediately my eyes fell on her, there they remained greedily fastened. I instinctively felt that it was Maud Neville ; a fine, well-grown young woman, dark-haired, fresh-coloured, with agreeable features, clear eyes, and a remarkably firm mouth and chin. The term "good-looking" just suited her ; she was *good-looking*—something solid, sensible, pleasant to the eye, if not strictly handsome. The manner, and the expression of face, were frank and rather

eager: the movements more quick than graceful. I watched her for full five minutes with intense interest.

"Well," I sighed, as they moved away, "this then is she! I am glad to have seen her. Strange! she is not the sort of person I fancied that he——We know so little of men's tastes. She has character, I am sure——consistency. Was that the charm? I am better looking, I suppose. Pshaw! what a fool I am, to think that has anything in the world to do with it! Well, now I must be up and doing. They must have returned to Neville Hall, and it is time I were gone."

"Excuse me, my dear," said Miss Bissett's small voice, opening the door ajar, "but I must break through your rule for once, in favour of my friend Miss Neville, whom I am so anxious you should know. She only returned home yesterday, and has ridden over to see me. Maud, my dear, come in; allow me to make you acquainted with Miss Hope, of whom I have been talking to you."

The young lady entered. I had no means of escape, and felt myself growing red and white as I bowed. She looked at me in her

rapid way from head to foot: not the impertinent stare of fashionable life, but a searching, intelligent glance, surprised at something unexpected.

She held out her hand. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Hope. Our neighbourhood doesn't abound in young ladies, and Miss Bissett tells me so much about you"—(I shot a look at that lady, but she screwed up her lips tightly to signify discretion)—"that I am very anxious we should become friends. I hope you'll come over and see me."

"Thank you—but I must return to London the day after to-morrow."

"Nonsense, my dear," said Miss Bissett. "Brother will never hear of that. But you will not have much time, I suspect, to cultivate friendships *now*, my dear Maud," she added, with a sly smile.

"I am not to be married for three months, if you mean that; and Hubert will be with us very little, I believe. He has so much business, and lawyers are so slow. By-the-by, you don't know Aunt Rochford, I think? They are coming over, if Violet is well

enough, on Tuesday, and you must really come and make their acquaintance. Do, now."

I was filled with dismay; and when Miss Bissett accepted for herself and me, could only repeat that I should have left Exton before then, and were it not so, that I was unfit at present to mix in society.

"By-the-by," said Miss Bissett, as if she had hit suddenly on a bright thought, "you know one of the Rochford party!—the governess, Miss What's-her-name?—an old friend of yours you told me, I think. You would like to see her, I'm sure."

"You know Miss Lateward? You met her abroad, I suppose? An excellent woman—but stiff. However, she is bringing up Violet capitally, and my aunt is really fond of her, and she doesn't *easily* like people, so there must be good in her; but she bores me dreadfully. I begged that if they came, Violet might have a holiday and Miss Lateward be left behind. It isn't very civil saying that, if she is a friend of yours, but I can't help it. By-the-by, did you ever happen to meet my cousin, Mr. Rochford, abroad?"

"Y-yes—I have met him."

"You never told me so, my dear," said Miss Bissett, looking surprised.

"Didn't I? Oh! it wasn't any acquaintance to speak of. He has forgotten my name long ago, I am sure."

"He never forgets a face, at all events," laughed Miss Neville. "I am sure he won't have forgotten *yours*."

I shivered and turned aside to the book-case, under a pretence of replacing the volume in my hand.

"Come, there is the luncheon-bell. We won't wait. When brother gets any one to his farm, there is no knowing when he will come away."

We were crossing the hall.

"Will you excuse me, Miss Bissett? I don't feel——"

The words died away on my lips. *There he stood before me.*

The hall door was open. Mr. Bissett and he were just entering. My knees seemed to give way under me. I caught hold of the marble table to prevent myself from falling; and by a strong effort I managed to retain some semblance of composure.

He turned deadly pale, and stood looking at me as if I were an apparition. I will confess that a spasm of joy shot through me, and my courage, strange to say, overcame my emotion when I saw that his self-possession was even more upset than mine.

Miss Neville was occupied in receiving the hearty salutations of Mr. Bissett. His sister had passed on to the dining-room.

It was necessary to speak, and at once. Miss Neville had turned towards us.

"I see, Mr. Rochford, you do not remember me—Miss Hope."

"Come, brother!" cried Miss Bissett, from the dining-room, "don't stand gossiping there. Luncheon is getting cold."

Rochford said nothing, but offered me his arm; then he asked abruptly,

"How long have you been here? What does all this mean—Miss—Hope? How is it that the brilliant capital has spared you?"

It was with great difficulty I replied in a low voice, as we seated ourselves at the table,

"Paris has *not*, indeed, spared me; in another sense, heavy sorrows—heavy trou-

bles of many kinds. That is why I am here. I do not expect you to spare me, either. You find me in a strange position."

Miss Neville threw off her riding-hat, and said, carelessly,

"I was sure you wouldn't forget Miss Hope, Hubert. She said you would. You must join in trying to persuade her to come over to the Hall for a few days, instead of returning to London. I'll mount you on my little bay mare, Miss Hope; and when that gentleman is busy with deeds and lawyers as long as my arm—I mean deeds, not lawyers—you and I will have some pleasant rides over the country. If this weather lasts, it will be charming."

"I hope it won't, my dear Maud," said Mr. Bissett; "it will bring everything much too forward. We shall suffer for it by-and-by. Miss Hope, a slice of brawn? That field of Farmer Smith's you passed on the road, Mr. Rochford, why the wheat there is already——"

"Barley, brother, isn't it? Well, it don't signify, to be sure. Maud, how are your anemones coming on? Those splendid ones I gave you before I went abroad? That

was a great piece of generosity on my part. I can't bear giving away my flowers. It is the only thing in which I believe I am really stingy."

"They are your children, dear Miss Bissett; no wonder. My children are my birds and my dogs. Unfortunately, Hubert can't bear them."

"That is an exaggeration, Maud. I think there are places fitter than a young lady's boudoir for three or four pointers and greyhounds. And when one is talking, or even reading quietly, there are pleasanter things than an aviary in the same room; but in their proper place——"

"Ah! that is what people always say when they don't like a thing. Now, I think your books, and poor-laws, and petitions, and all the rest of it, very well in their place; but when you are with me, I prefer your conversation."

The door opened as Mr. Bissett was laughing, and Mrs. Deane appeared.

"Good morning to you all. Just run in for a moment. My dear Maud, welcome back! Mr. Rochford, how d'ye do, sir. Hope your mother is pretty well. Any

news from Anchester about poor John Hurst? When is he to be tried? His wife just laid in of twins. I've come, my dear, to ask for some wine for the poor thing. Is there any chance of her husband's being acquitted? May I give her any hope?"

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Deane, as far as actual law goes, there is no doubt he is guilty. In a very similar case, last year, a man was transported."

"Yes," said Mr. Bissett, looking judicial and severe, "and these petty thefts have become so common of late."

"Dear me!" said his sister. "After all, to think of transporting a man for a few miserable turnips!"

"Potatoes, my love—a sack of potatoes; you can't be too exact in cases of this sort."

"His wife was starving at home!" burst in Mrs. Deane. "And then, to think of an infamous wretch like that Scroggs, who beats his wife and nearly kills her, and is sentenced to a month's hard labour, and fined five shillings. It is shameful!"

"If Hubert gets into Parliament next year," cried Maud, "I shall make him bring in a bill to redress the wrongs of women."

That wife-beating makes my blood boil. Don't you agree with me, Miss Hope, that American women are quite right about the emancipation of our sex?"

"Emancipation from what?" I stammered.

"Oh! from the swathing-bands that society puts round us. There is my cousin, for instance, who thinks that a woman ought to be brought up in a dull routine, like Violet, and like me. As to any knowledge of life, or a foreign education, or a woman's having any independence or ambition, or being anything, in short, but a sheet of white paper, he can't bear it."

"You draw a pleasing picture of my liberal views, Maud."

"It is only the truth, Hubert. You think a girl's education ought to be made up like a prescription, so many grains of literature to so many of housekeeping; and when made up, to be kept in a cool place until required."

"At all events, my dear," said Miss Bissett, laughing, "you ought to be glad that he approves of the way in which *you* have been *made up*."

"Perhaps he finds now it is not so good

in practice as in theory. I'm a painful instance, you know, of what is called a solid education. I have never been allowed to read a novel, or any other poetry than Milton, and that I thought a bore."

"My dear!" cried Miss Bissett, much shocked. "'Paradise Lost' a bore! Impossible!"

"I did, really. I suppose I have no imagination: at all events it has never been cultivated. Papa taught me the Latin Grammar, and said I should find it very useful. Perhaps I may when I have a house of my own; at present I rather regret not having learnt to play and sing."

"I wish you did most heartily, my dear," said Mrs. Deane, who, having finished luncheon, was again in full possession of her tongue. "I wish you did, for then you would see after the singing in church. It really gets worse and worse. I dread *you*, Mr. Rochford, with your critical ear—and your mother, too; I remember how she used to play. But we have really no one here who is musical. By-the-by, Miss Hope, perhaps *you* are? No? Sorry for that. Well, I mustn't stay. You will excuse me, I know."

"I want to consult you, my dear Mrs. Deane, about how many yards of flannel it takes to make——"

"Come, my love, if we have all done, we may as well go into the garden. I want to show you my Cochinchina fowls, Miss Maud."

Mr. Bissett opened the window, and they all stepped out. This was the moment to escape. I turned to leave the room.

"Stop! I beg your pardon, Miss Hope—since you wish to be known by that name—may I speak a word with you?" said Rochford, in a low voice.

My fingers twitched nervously round the handle of the door. I looked back, but did not speak.

"I have to apologise for the way in which I met you just now. I was quite unprepared for this. Pardon me if my manner seemed unkind. I assure you I was wounded to the quick when you referred to your great sorrow—for I sympathised heartily with you when I heard of it; but we since heard that you had recovered your spirits, and were going again into the world, and

latterly that you were——in short, *false rumours*, no doubt. May I now take the liberty of an old acquaintance, and ask you to tell me how it is you come to be here, and under a feigned name? I feel that I have no claim on your confidence, but I ask it because—because——”

“There is nothing to apologise for, Mr. Rochford,” said I, coldly. “If you believed those rumours, you are perfectly at liberty to do so still. I shall not contradict or explain anything. I have left my home, and am living under another name. These are facts: to which you may add, that I intend earning my bread as an artist. But I wish you very distinctly to understand that in accepting my friends’ invitation down here, I had not the most distant idea that I was coming into the neighbourhood of——that I was likely to meet *any one* I ever knew before. However, I leave this in a day or two, and to avoid a great deal of gossip, I think you will agree that it is better to say nothing about me. Mr. and Miss Bissett know all the painful circumstances that have led to my being here; and that, Mr. Rochford, I suppose you will consider sufficient.”

His cheek flushed, and he looked annoyed.

"You speak with resentment: but it was from no distrust I asked for an explanation, but because you are here in a false position, and because I would vindicate you from those very rumours you allude to. I know much of what you had to suffer. I can guess more. In memory of some happy hours, Miss Percival, let me be of service to you, if I can, in any way. My mother——"

He hesitated, and that firm face actually quivered with the strength of some repressed emotion.

"You can do me no service, thank you," I replied, gently. "We shall move in very different paths henceforward, and it is not probable that we shall cross each other again. Allow me, therefore, in return for your expressions of sympathy, to offer you my sincere wishes that your marriage may prove happy, and your future be as bright as it, no doubt, seems to you now. Good morning."

I turned and left the room. To linger, to prolong this interview, was impossible.

I could only trust my self-command up to a certain point. When I got to my own room I turned the key of the door, and did not come down stairs again until some hours after Miss Neville and her cousin had ridden away.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was dusk, and I had paced the shrubbery with a rapid step. Yes, I must leave Exton at once—why not to-night? To linger in this neighbourhood, with the chance of another such meeting, was positive torture to me. He was right. I was in a false position. The very last person who ought to have been, necessarily *was* the sharer of my secret. If it should accidentally be discovered now—if it should reach Mrs. Rochford's ears—that I, Margaret Percival, was come into her son's neighbourhood—My pride revolted fiercely at the bare idea.

I nearly ran against Mrs. Deane in the impetuosity of my self-absorbed walk. She was crossing the shrubbery, and stopped short.

“Bless me, Miss Hope! why, where are

you going at that pace? Only walking up and down? Well, I don't mind if I take a turn with you before dinner, as all my work is done for to-day. Now, tell me what you think of Miss Neville. No fool, you know, under that off-hand manner. Plenty of determination and good sense, eh?"

"She has a frank, fresh character, apparently, which is always pleasant."

"But that very frankness prevents her being generally appreciated. Many people don't like her."

"Do you think that signifies, as long as the few—the *one*—appreciates her? If she is wise, that will be quite sufficient for her."

"Ah! hem—don't know—can't say. I doubt the *one* appreciating her as she deserves. However, it is no business of mine."

"You are not serious, Mrs. Deane? They have known each other from children, have they not? and now that Mr. Rochford is going to marry his cousin, why should you doubt his appreciating her good qualities?"

"Well, perhaps I am wrong; but I know she never had an idea he cared about her until he proposed, and if she didn't believe

him to be too highly principled to marry her while he is in love with somebody else, I'm sure she wouldn't have him."

"Oh! So then there was some other attachment, was there?" A pause.

"Well, it's all past and done with now, my dear Miss Hope, so I suppose there's no great harm in telling you that his mother was for some time very uneasy about his marrying some half-French girl he knew in Paris. She had been very badly brought up, and was in shocking society, and, altogether, Mrs. Rochford was naturally in a great fright. The idea of such a daughter-in-law, coming down here to turn everything topsy-turvy, was dreadful, of course, for she likes exercising her influence on her son. She is an excellent woman, but she has that little failing—and though she wished him to marry, she also wished to choose his wife for him."

I stooped to gather a primrose. "Well, and how did it end?"

"Oh! I believe she wrote to him, imploring him to do nothing rash. But he was very much infatuated for a long time, and declared that the girl would be very dif-

ferent if she were in other circumstances; until at last his eyes were opened to her real character, and, to his mother's great joy, he unexpectedly returned home. How she managed it I'm sure I don't know; but the great wish of her life was realised at last, and he proposed to his cousin Maud. He told her what she knew already—that he had loved, and been disappointed; and as she didn't care for any one, she accepted him. She is really fond of him in her way, too, and I dare say they will get on very well by-and-by, only I *don't* think they are particularly suited; and certainly he is not very like an ardent lover, is he? Now, just fancy his riding off again to Rochford to-night!”

I drew a long breath. “Oh! indeed? And does he not return to Neville Hall?”

“He is to bring his mother there next week. But he is very little there himself, always having business or something that takes him away. Really it is very good of Maud to stand it.”

“Ah! very. By-the-by, you were kind enough yesterday to propose writing to a cousin of yours, who I think you said is a printseller in London, relative to my board-

ing in his house. It would be doing me a great service if you would do so, as I must leave this on Monday."

"Why, my dear Miss Hope, I shan't be able to get his answer. This is Saturday. If I write by this evening's post, I can't have an answer before Tuesday. And, indeed, I think it would be a very great advantage to you in all ways being in a respectable house like my cousin's. His wife is an excellent woman, and he could be of such use to you in your profession. You must just put off your departure till Wednesday, my dear; it really is not respectable your going to that great Babylon alone, and getting into you don't know where for lodgings. No, no; better wait another day, and have John's answer. There's six o'clock striking, and dinner at a quarter past! What will Mr. Deane say to me? Good night, Miss Hope, good night!"

I was left alone there upon the bench. My eyes were opened now. I no longer doubted that he had loved me—nay, that he loved me still. Did I exult in this? No. His love had not been strong enough to resist the pressure from without—a mother's

solemn warnings and tender supplications, and the world's calumny. The love I dreamed of was no weak infant-passion, to be weaned like this. Oh no, oh no ! my heart cried aloud. I, the poor, despised girl, of such poor moral training, found strength, even at the eleventh hour, to resist this heart-perjury, while *you*, Hubert Rochford, the man of pure life and lofty aims, trampled under foot that sacred fire of Love. The world can never accuse you—I even have no right to do so: no word ever passed between us. But through the long years to come, how will the secret monitor at your heart speak to you in the watches of the night ? Do you choose your wife as part of the great social scheme ? a mere helpmate in the outer vineyard, not a home-refuge from the disappointments and unfruitful labour there ? If, indeed, she be content with such a lot, well ; but if, having asked for bread, she finds she has no teeth for stone—beware, Hubert Rochford, beware !

The following was the first day of the week, essentially one of peace at Exton, and as unlike the brilliant Paris Sunday to which I had been accustomed, when all the frivoli-

ties of the past week come to maturity and burst into blossom on the Boulevards, as it was unlike the jaded London Sabbath, where dingy streets seem mourning that another week has commenced.

I sat in the little church, and looked down, probably for the last time in my life, upon that peasant congregation. Happy and tranquil life, how much to be envied ! I thought to myself. That good grey head, in horn-spectacles, reading his Bible on the same oak bench where he stood, as a child, beside his mother, listening in decent reverence to the minister's discourse, is not his round of labour, and the rest that labour sweetens, better than all the feverish wants and struggles of the world ? Though Mr. Deane's discourse be marvellously dull in our ears, though we hold the choir to be somewhat harsh and nasal, they are not so to that old man. In the fulness of time he will be laid beside his faithful wife in the green churchyard where his fathers sleep before him : and another generation will grow up, and pass away as he has done, and the same psalm will be sung on Sunday mornings, and swallows will

twitter, as they do now, under the eaves of the old church porch.

I never felt so strongly drawn to the country as I did then, so loth to exchange it for the crowd and hurry of a capital. I would willingly have gone to live in any obscure village, where among the poor I might have found a field for exertion. But I felt it was not to be. I must work hard for my brothers and myself, and this could only be in London, where there was, no doubt, misery and sorrow enough in all shapes to be sought out. The peace of the country was for others: the happiness of listening to wind-stirred boughs and quiet field-sounds was not for me.

But at the earnest representation of my kind hosts, backed by Mrs. Deane, I consented to remain at Exton until "Cousin John's" answer should be received, which, at latest, must be on Wednesday. Had Hubert Rochford still been in the neighbourhood, I should have held firmly to my original resolve; but he had returned home, so there was no chance of our meeting, and on Wednesday nothing would prevent my being on my road to London.

Miss Bissett came to me early on Monday morning, with a note in her hand.

“Maud wants us very much to go over there to-morrow and spend the day, if you won’t sleep, my dear. You will come with me, won’t you? Do, now.”

“Pray do not let me prevent your going, Miss Bissett, but I cannot. You see how I behaved the other day. I am not fit for civilised society.”

“Well! it will be a great disappointment to her, I know. This is what she says about you, in her odd way.” She opened the note and read: “‘I took a fancy to your friend Miss Hope, though I suspect it is more than she did to me. If I were a man I should fall desperately in love with her (only desperate love is out of fashion, I am told). I want to see her again, and I want Aunt Rochford to see her; so do bring her over on Tuesday.’ I suppose Mrs. Rochford comes to-morrow too, then. Now, my dear, do let me say——”

“Thank you, it is quite impossible. I am very much obliged to Miss Neville. I should have no objection to see her again, but it is out of the question. I cannot meet

strangers, Miss Bissett; pray do not urge me."

The amiable but obstinate little lady, however, was not to be baffled even now.

"Well, then, my dear Miss Hope, will you let me drive you over, quietly, this afternoon? I should like you to see the old Hall, and as you say you do not mind Maud, why you *can* have no objection?"

What will not a steady persistence achieve? I lothfully consented at last.

Neville Hall was four miles distant. Miss Bissett drove her grey ponies, and was sufficiently occupied in keeping them in hand, while I silently enjoyed the fragrant breath of spring as we drove along the lanes. At last we came in sight of the mansion, a fine old building, belonging to an age when men knew not architectural shams, before Grecian porticos overshadowed our doorways, and stucco had superseded honest scarlet bricks.

Miss Neville met us on the steps. She was surrounded by five or six large dogs, who alarmed me somewhat until I understood that they only meant to be friendly when they thrust their great cold noses into my hand.

“Down, Ponto ! Be quiet, Nep ! Ain’t you ashamed of yourself, sir, eh ? Are those your manners to company ? Miss Hope, I am glad to see you at our old house, though I wish you would have come to-morrow. ‘Better *soon* than never,’ though. Don’t be afraid of the dogs, they won’t hurt you. Will you come in and see papa ? and afterwards we can walk about.”

We passed through the hall, round which were stuffed birds in glass-cases—the trophies of a departed race of sportsmen—and entered the library. Mr. Neville was standing with his back to the fire. He bowed with great formality to us both, and then extended his hand frigidly to Miss Bissett. It was easy to see, as Shenstone says of some one, that “he was the dread of all jovial conversations and yet he had acquired the character of the most ingenious person of his county ; not that he had ever made any great discovery of his talents, but a few oracular declarations, joined with a common opinion that he was writing something for posterity, completed his reputation.” Mr. Neville had indeed done *his* work for posterity, for which it was to be hoped that posterity would be

as duly grateful as the present age was indifferent; and instead of "a few oracular sentences," his conversation was inexorable as fate. You saw it coming on; you felt that nothing could stop or change its course, or mitigate it in the smallest degree. Nothing less high-spirited than his daughter could have retained any elasticity under such circumstances. Mr. Neville quoted Virgil at us on the subject of the weather, but seemed very indifferent when I admired his old house, and asked some questions about the fine portraits on the wall. One, indeed, of the late Mr. Neville, with periwig and snuff-box, he pointed to, informing me that he, his father, had built a church and endowed an hospital; but when I learned that this was the same gentleman who had painted all the oak wainscots a pale salmon-colour, my wrath was kindled against him, and I immediately saw a strong family likeness to the present proprietor. We were shown the Blue Chamber in which his Majesty King Charles, of blessed memory, once slept; and the haunted chamber, in which no one had *ever* slept since a certain Neville was said to have roasted his wife

there. Then Miss Neville took us to her own private room, where an aviary of singing-birds occupied one entire window, and passing through a glass door, we descended into the gardens, and visited the fish-ponds, and the peacocks, and the owl in his solitary grotto, which were Miss Neville's peculiar charge.

"You must be very happy in this charming home of yours?"

"I suppose I am—I never thought about it. When Willie has been at home and is gone back to college, I find the difference, and am rather lonely. We suit each other exactly, Willie and I. Do you know, Miss Bissett, I used to think once that we should always live together, like you and your brother."

"Humph! my dear. I am afraid Mr. William would hardly like such a quiet life for very long."

"You think him very wild and extravagant; so he is, but he has such a good heart, and is so fond of me. I understand him better than papa does, and I intend him some day to marry Violet, which will be what historians call "a double alliance." I

am so sorry poor Vi is not allowed to come here to-day. She is left with that excellent old dragon Lateward (beg your pardon, Miss Hope), as my society, I suppose, was considered to be detrimental to the studies."

"I thought Mrs. Rochford was to come to-morrow, my dear."

"Oh ! no, this afternoon. Hubert brings his mother, and leaves her for a day or two. Do stay and see her ; they ought to be here before long."

The stable-clock struck four.

"Dear Miss Bissett, you don't like driving at dusk—had we not better be starting home ?"

I plucked the good lady's sleeve so imploringly that she resisted Miss Neville's efforts to detain us, and the carriage came round.

The ponies were very fresh, and as Miss Bissett stepped in, a shot in the wood close by startled them.

"Bless me, my dear Maud, what is that ?"

"The gamekeeper having a battue in honour of our guests. But take care of those little greys, Miss Bissett, they want a tight hand. Good-by, Miss Hope ; some-

thing tells me we shall meet 'again very soon."

I had just seated myself ; Miss Bissett was gathering up the reins, and the boy had stupidly left the ponies' heads to clamber into his seat behind, when there was another shot, still closer than the first, and the little animals began rearing. Miss Neville sprang forward, but it was too late. The traces had broken : the ponies set off full gallop down the avenue.

I was terrified, but sat quite still. Miss Bissett displayed more nerve than I should have expected, but the reins had slipped from her hand. Nothing could stop us now but the lodge-gate. Trees and bushes flew past : all the blood seemed rushing to my head. I could no longer see. I have a confused impression of Miss Bissett's giving a horrified cry, and of seeing some dark object coming on the road towards us.

The next moment, crash we came against it ! There was a piercing shriek, and I felt a shock as if every bone in my body was broken. The gravel flew up into my eyes, and I remember nothing more.

We had driven against the Rochford carriage, and the concussion had overturned us upon the side on which I sat. I remember opening my eyes once and recognising the anguished gaze of the person in whose arms I lay: then I relapsed with a pleasurable sigh into darkness, and remained unconscious for several hours.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRANGE room, round the walls of which hung rods and fishing-tackle, and two figures, equally strange to me, standing by the bedside. This is what I saw when I opened my eyes.

"She is coming round, ma'am. The head has bled a good deal, so we shan't require to take any blood. The ankle, unfortunately, has begun to swell up, so that I can't tell whether there is anything broken. I am half afraid: but you can't do better than continue lotioning it; and I'll ride over in the morning, ma'am."

I knew now that I was not dreaming. I felt a throbbing, burning pain all up my right foot and ankle. At last the door opened, and a familiar face approached the bed.

"Betsy, tell me where——" I began, faintly.

"Hush! You mustn't talk, not on no account. Drink this, there's a dear, and keep quiet."

I felt cooled and refreshed after taking the draught she brought me, and fell asleep. Several times in the course of the night I woke, and one or other of those women were sure to be in the room: moving stealthily about, under the tremulous spotted shadows of a rushlight. I never wondered, or asked myself who that other watcher might be. My brain was in too confused a state to do more than passively admit impressions. When I opened my eyes in the grey of the morning, Betsy alone was with me: I began to collect my scattered thoughts.

"Tell me where I am, Betsy. What has happened? I can't rest any longer without knowing."

"You are at Neville Hall, Miss Marg'ret, but not on no account to speak, if you please. I were sent for, and came direct after the haccident; and Miss Bissett, she escaped miraculous! She were a good deal decom-

posed, beside a slight confusion of the face, and lost her front, but nothink to speak of."

"I want to ask you particularly——"

"There's the doctor's ring, and you're not on no account to speak, miss."

"Stop! I insist on it, Betsy. I have been delirious—light-headed! Have I said anything——"

"No, no, deary, not a ha'porth. Never spoke a word."

"And who is the tall lady in black?"

"Mrs. Rochford."

* * * *

It is a marvel I had not a brain fever, such was the state of strong but suppressed mental excitement I was in on finding that I was an inmate of the same house with Mrs. Rochford and her son, and that here I must remain. The doctor authoritatively pronounced against my being moved; and said I must make up my mind to be a prisoner for some weeks probably. The injuries to the head, indeed, were slight, but the inflammation to my ankle continued unabated; it was a very severe sprain, if nothing worse, and my pulse was so high,

added to my extreme restlessness, that the doctor looked grave. He was deeper-sighted than most country practitioners, and he soon perceived that more was to be apprehended from the irritation of the brain, caused by some secret anxiety, than from any local injuries.

The room was kept dark, and for days Mrs. Rochford and Betsy were the only persons, except the doctor, who entered it. The former little suspected how her presence tended to increase the state of feverish excitement in which I lay. She was the one object of my study and speculation: my eyes followed every motion of that gaunt figure about the room. She seldom spoke; when she did, it was in a whisper. The third morning she opened the Book of Job, and read part of that glorious poem in a low, sonorous voice. What was it about her that reminded me of my Aunt Mary? Certainly not her face or figure. She was harder-featured and a larger woman; but the expression of her eyes, and certain expressions of mind shown in peculiar movements and intonations, were strangely like my aunt, and drew me more towards Mrs.

Rochford than even her tender and motherly care.

Once, through the stillness, I heard a step that came softly down the passage and stopped at my door, and when Mrs. Rochford had opened it, I thought I recognised the voice that whispered without ; but it might have been fancy.

Gradually, more and more, in spite of my deep-rooted dread of Mrs. Rochford, I felt that there existed one of those inexplicable sympathies between us that every one has experienced, at some time in his life, towards a perfect stranger. I had not spoken to her ; and yet I could have fallen on her neck and opened all my heart to her—under other circumstances !

Maud Neville was allowed to see me on the third day ; I was much better, though still very weak, and forbidden to talk much.

“ You frightened us dreadfully, my dear Miss Hope. I really thought you were killed when Hubert carried you into the house. He rode off instantly for the doctor, and we were in such a state till he returned ! You see it was decreed by Fate that you *should* stay here ! You wouldn't yield, and

Fate is not to be thwarted with impunity. Now Miss Bissett, who was more amenable, came off very easily. So odd, being such a weak little creature, that she shouldn't be more hurt."

"Have you heard how she is to-day?"

"Oh! as well as ever; only dreadfully distressed about you—sends over twice a day. The old gentleman rode over himself this morning, like Count Ory, he said (in some opera they saw abroad), come to invade our conventual solitude! You know that we are three lone women here? Papa and Hubert obliged to go up to London about those horrid settlements."

"Ah! Will they be long absent?"

"A week, I suppose, or more."

"Your convent is very quiet. I'm afraid you've hushed even your birds' voices on my account. Where am I? In what part of the house?"

"On the ground-floor, opening into my boudoir. This is Willie's own den, and these are his trophies and implements of war. There is his rod, and below it the outline of a trout weighing eight pounds, he caught last summer. Dear fellow! he never

had his room so honoured before ; but it was more convenient to carry you in here ; and, when you are well enough, we can wheel you on the terrace, and into my room, so easily."

I assured her I should be able to walk about in a few days. I was, indeed, sanguine of being well enough to leave the Hall before Hubert's return. But, although the following day I was strong enough to sit up for a few hours, the doctor gave me no hope of being able to put my foot to the ground for three weeks at least. He said (at Mrs. Rochford's instigation, I suspect) that I must give up all idea of being removed to Exton, or elsewhere, for the present. The slightest movement of the ankle might retard my recovery for months.

One of the few things that had, by accident, been thrown into my box the night I left home was an old sketch-book, and I tried to give myself the semblance of employment, as I lay near the window, by sketching some beech-trees near the house. But the fingers moved listlessly: the pencil lay idle between them for the half-hour at a time, while Mrs. Rochford plied her energetic

knitting-pins beside me. There were times when it seemed as if all the vigour of her mind could not shake off a certain gloomy preoccupation; and then the long lapses of conversation were only interrupted occasionally by a deep sigh. She would suddenly turn round after a while, as she did one morning, with the question,

"Where were you born and brought up, Miss Hope?"

"In Paris."

"Ever been to school?"

"No;—excepting, perhaps, in that of adversity."

She looked at me for a moment in silence. "The best we can go to, and we are never too old for it. I am an old woman, and have had plenty; and yet, perhaps, my schooling is not done." Then, after a pause, she added, "But you are too young for that, my dear. Don't get into a sentimental way of talking about sorrow. It comes soon enough."

"I am only saying the truth, Mrs. Rochford. I have had an unhappy home, and I am alone in the world."

"It is strange how unequally troubles and

crosses are allotted in life! There is Maud, for instance, who is just your age, and, except her dear mother's death, has never had a grief. Still, I am not sure that——”

“Miss Neville,” said I, hurriedly, “has such a bright disposition by nature, that it would be difficult to cloud it.”

“She is a very good girl—few like her for sterling worth—and capitally constituted for the kind of life she will lead when she is married: visiting the poor, and taking her full share in the work of a country life. She has no nerves or sensitiveness. Very few girls are fitted by their education for the kind of thing, and they get soon disgusted with coarseness and ignorance. They would like, perhaps, to have a model school, and trellised cottages, with old women in red cloaks, but they shrink from dirt and disease. Isn't it so? Don't you feel that?”

“Perhaps. I don't think I should; but I have never tried.”

“And you are one of the few girls to whom I *would* give a trial, Miss Hope, though you *have* been brought up abroad, against which I have an old-fashioned English prejudice.”

"Does Mr. Neville interest himself about the poor?" said I, anxious to change the subject.

"Mr. Neville is an upright, worthy man, Miss Hope; but he cannot be said to *interest* himself about anything except dead languages and dictionaries, which I don't understand. He doesn't know a turnip from a potato, so how can he care about the country? and though I've tried to get him to exert himself in improving the intellectual condition of his peasantry, he only shakes his head and quotes some Latin, to the effect that they are all swine, which is true enough, but is that a reason we are not to try and elevate them? My dear sister, whose nature was warm and genial, never had much sympathy with her husband."

"Why did she marry him?"

"She had seen very little of the world, and had had no opportunities of comparing him with any one else. It was a very suitable marriage in worldly respects, and my father had long wished it."

"It tells against a secluded youth; don't you think so?"

"Perhaps," she replied, gravely; and then

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added, "The responsibility of parents in these cases is a very grave one."

Miss Neville stood beside my sofa in her boudoir that afternoon, as I was finishing my sketch in the window.

"I wish I could draw. I can't do any of those sort of things, unfortunately."

I offered to give her such instruction as I could. She sat down with a smile.

"Do you think people without talent can ever arrive at doing anything, Miss Hope?"

"Hardly any one is without some talent for some one thing, however small; but it may lie dormant."

"I don't think all the teaching in the world would make me a musician, or make me draw really well. I wish it could, for Hubert's sake—more than for my own. He ought to have an accomplished wife."

"For his sake, then, try and become one," I said, in a low voice.

"Do you believe in what is called 'improving oneself?'"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Well, I don't. I am speaking of the *dulce*, you know, not the *utile*, as papa would say. One must have a natural gift

for these things, otherwise it is vanity and vexation of spirit. I dare say you drew from your cradle?"

"I did: but a talent often lies dormant for years. Bernardin de St. Pierre, for instance, never wrote till he was near fifty: besides many others."

"Still the disposition must be there. Now really your drawings are good enough to be an artist's."

"What do you understand by an artist?"

"Oh! any one who makes it their profession, I suppose—who sells their things."

"In that sense I *am* an artist, though not in the higher sense, I fear. Did you not know this?"

"No. I hadn't an idea of it. I should have thought—I mean, I should never—no, what I *do* mean is, that I never met any one about whom I felt so much curiosity as I do about you. I beg your pardon, but I can't help it. You seem to have seen so much of the world for your age, and—but I see I am paining you: forgive me; I am inconsiderate."

There was a pause, and then Miss Neville asked abruptly,

"Have you any sketches of Paris in that book? That is where your family live, I believe?"

"I have no longer any family, Miss Neville."

She took the book on her knees, and turned over the sketches, examining each with great care. She had gone half through them with little comment, when she suddenly uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"How very curious! Did you do this? 'A window in the Hôtel Cluny?' Hubert has the exact fellow of it. I know the drawing well. He has been having the school windows at Rochford made from it. It is *most* singular. I could have declared this was the same sketch."

"Really!" "I felt the colour mounting to my temples under her frank, steadfast gaze. "It is a popular subject. Dear Miss Neville, would you give me that screen? the fire is so hot. Now, if you have cut your pencil, let us begin. You must hold it like this.

* * * *

A window in Miss Neville's room, as I have mentioned, opened into the garden below. This garden communicated with

the village by a path through the shrubbery, which every one used who had business to transact with the young lady, instead of going round half a mile, by the great entrance. My sofa was drawn near the window, which stood open, for it was a warm April day. Miss Neville had left the room for a moment, and my head had dropped upon the pillow, and was shaded by my hand. A step came along the gravel; it ascended the steps, and a shadow fell across the room. Not till then did I raise my head and look up.

The person who stood there gave a sharp scream.

“Good God! what do I see? *You?* Marie Dumont! Hush, hush! for Heaven’s sake! What are you about here? Pray, pray don’t appear to know me—my name is Hope—don’t——”

“What was that scream?” said Miss Neville, running into the room. “Surely some one screamed?”

Marie was leaning, pale as death, against the window-sill.

“I twisted my foot, mademoiselle, coming up the step. It is nothing. I brought you

home the embroidery, and I thought you would like to know I have two more scholars."

"That is famous. You will soon have more than you can manage. Mr. Rochford was inquiring particularly how your boy was getting on. I told him that he was already half English."

The fierce look I had once before seen there came over her face; but a gentle and subdued expression quickly succeeded it, as she said,

"Let him be *all* English, so that he be like Mr. Rochford and you. All we have we owe to you, through him. Mademoiselle, I pray to the good God my boy may never forget it."

When she was gone, Miss Neville said,

"A singular parishioner for our quiet little village, I dare say you think? The fact is, Hubert was interested about her, and asked me, some months ago, whether, if he rented a cottage for her here, I thought I could get her employment in embroidering and teaching French. Rochford Court is so isolated—so far from any gentlemen's houses—that this populous district seemed to offer a

better chance of success. I promised to do all I could for his protégée, and she came over, and it has answered beyond our most sanguine expectations. She has now seven scholars, who are too glad to avail themselves of a real French accent, instead of the —shire version of Clapham.-Seminary French, which is all Anchester affords. Besides this, she teaches the art of embroidery to our school children, so that in process of time we shall be populated with a generation of *brodeuses*; and she makes a great deal by ministering to the vanity of our farmers' daughters in worked collars, &c. Her boy goes to our village school, and Hubert means to put him into some trade by-and-by. That is the history, present and future, of Marie Dumont. What her past may have been I never inquired, but it was a sad one, I am sure."

CHAPTER XV.

It was dusk when Rochford entered the room, on his return with Mr. Neville. He came up to my sofa, and said a few commonplace words. We shook hands like people tolerably well acquainted—a greeting more cold than coldness itself.

Well, I had dreaded it so long, and now it was over! Candles were brought. I could not but be struck by the alteration in his appearance during the last fortnight. His face was very worn and pale; the least observant would have remarked, “There is a man bowed down by some secret care!” and the struggle to cast this aside rendered his manner almost irritable at times. I glanced at Mrs. Rochford. Was it possible that a mother’s eye should be blind to this? Her back was towards me; but presently

she rose, and walking up to him with her firm step, she put back the hair from his forehead and kissed it. Then she left the room without a word.

Maud drew a stool near Rochford's feet, and sat there looking up into his face every now and then with an inquiring glance, not without a shade of disappointment in it. He appeared unconscious of her presence; he never spoke or lifted his eyes from the fire on which they were fixed. At last Maud spoke, and in her usual vein; but I fancied it was with some degree of effort, as though she were resolved *not* to entertain any foolish fancies.

"You have brought down the London fog with you, cousin Hubert."

No answer.

"Come, tell us some news, sir. What have you been doing in town?"

"Law and lawyers—nothing else, Maud. And you? Riding and amusing yourself, I hope, while I——"

"Oh! don't flatter yourself you were the least missed. We have been very busy in all sorts of ways. To begin with, Miss Hope has been giving me drawing lessons."

"She is very good, I am sure."

"Yes. *You* wouldn't take the trouble."

"My dear child, I never knew you had any taste for it."

"Neither did I, sir; but you should have found it out, as Miss Hope did. Perhaps you're not aware that she is a great artist? I intend the walls of my boudoir at Rochford to be hung with her pictures. You shall be her first patron—do you hear, Hubert?"

I heard *him* writhe in his chair, but Maud, quite unconscious of the effect of her words, continued,

"You must see her charming sketches after dinner. There is one of a window in the Hôtel Cluny——"

Rochford suddenly darted forwards from his chair to poke the fire. In doing so, a small case fell from his breast-pocket.

"Oh! by-the-by, I forgot it. That bauble is for you, Maud. Say nothing about it, my child—not worth thanking me for. What's o'clock? It must be time to dress for dinner."

He leant his head between his arms against the mantelpiece. Maud held the bracelet just as he had given it into her

hand, her eyes fixed, with a peculiar expression, on her cousin. The painful silence was broken by the dressing-bell; and in a few minutes I was left alone.

The Deanes and the Bissetts dined at the Hall that day. After dinner the ladies adjourned, on my account, from the drawing-room to Maud's boudoir, where Mrs. Deane gossiped over all her neighbours, high and low, with pre-Raffaelite minutiae of detail. I remember that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Hunter were under discussion when the gentlemen came in for their coffee. Sometimes a subject which has no interest for one bears indirectly on another which has: it was so in the present case.

"Is there no chance of her recovery?" asked Maud. "Poor man! I'm very sorry for him. He is perfectly wrapped up in her."

"No hope of her living another six months, I'm afraid. Sad thing—very sad!—and he such a reformed man, too, by his marriage! A shocking character, I'm told, before, but impossible, I'm sure, to find a better husband. Such an attached couple!"

"It is very strange," said Miss Bissett.

shaking her virtuous little head, "but I always considered that a permanent affection must be founded on *esteem*."

"A very just remark," said Mr. Neville, who had just entered. "*Conciliat amicitiam et conservat, virtus*. A profound truth, which the ancients did well to recognise——"

"Oh!" interrupted his daughter, quickly, "I'm not at all sure of that. One hears of very bad people inspiring very strong love. I believe, on the contrary, that no one ever made a great sacrifice for *esteem*. It is a sort of sentiment to lend money on, not to give up a life to."

"Well, certainly," observed Mrs. Deane, "there is William Hunter, the brother, who is a most estimable person, and so is his wife, and yet they're anything but happy—quite unsuited. That is in favour of your argument, Maud."

"But then, you know, he was attached to some one else, and both parents were very much against it, and it was broken off. I don't think he was ever quite the same afterwards."

"Ah! *vetitum ergo cupitum*—true, very

true, from our first parents downwards. The Roman law——”

“Poor Bill Hunter!” cut in Mr. Bissett (in nervous terror of the Roman law, which was inflicted, with all its severity, on Mr. Deane for a full hour afterwards). “A cheery good fellow he used to be, but since he married his rich psalm-singing wife (beg pardon, Mrs. Deane) he is the most melancholy, chapfallen man in the neighbourhood.”

“My love,” remonstrated his sister, “a more virtuous, kind, and charitable woman than Mrs. William Hunter does not exist. If her husband is not happy, surely it cannot be *her* fault.”

“I am of the opinion of the Dutch philosopher,” said Maud, “who declared that people were like cheeses cut in half and rolled down hill, and that very seldom the right halves came together, but more commonly two that don’t at all match. When, by any chance, the proper halves *do* meet, I think nothing in the world ought to prevent their joining.”

Miss Neville laughed, and walked to the further end of the room to cover up her bird-cages for the night. As she passed the

lamp, I remarked that her cheek was flushed, and the full firm lips more firmly set than ever. Neither Mrs. Rochford nor her son had spoken; and I suppose it occurred to Mrs. Deane as ill-advised to protract the present discussion, for she speedily unravelled another skein from her inexhaustible wallet of small-talk; and soon afterwards I was carried to my room.

Several days elapsed. An indescribable weight had fallen on the spirits of the little party since Rochford's return. For myself, my sole thought and desire, of course, more than ever, was to escape from the singular and humiliating position in which I found myself. But the very intensity of this longing operated against my recovery. The feverish and harrowing anxiety to which I was a prey prevented my sleeping at night, and I grew more wan and wasted every day. My position would have been even less supportable had I seen much of Rochford; but he never entered Maud's room until the evening, when my health was a very plausible excuse for retiring early. His manner on these occasions was constrained; but towards his mother and Maud

it underwent many variations: indifferent, preoccupied, and sometimes considerate and gentle as his former self, only always tinged with a profound melancholy. Poor Mrs. Rochford! her brooding fits were daily longer, her brow more and more contracted with the lines of anxious thought. Expiation had already commenced for the terrible mistake which, in her affection for her son, she had committed. It is for ever going on around us, the same mistake and the same expiation, and some of the best men only learn too late that human hearts are not to be squared and measured according to a given plan, as they lay out their houses and their grounds!

She and I were generally alone together now, for Miss Neville had taken to longer rides than ever across the country—fast and furious gallops, from which the grooms complained that the horses returned as tired as after a day's hunting. If Miss Neville herself was tired, at all events she never complained: her face had a hard, indomitable look, under which it was difficult to see whether she suffered anything. But I caught Mrs. Rochford's eyes more than once anxi-

ously bent on her ; and as she sat there, apparently tranquil and absorbed over her embroidery, I think a close observer would have detected that she was working in secret the solution of some difficult problem.

One wet afternoon, when she could not ride, this was especially the case. The rain falling silently outside, the voices silent within; the dogs shaking the water from their backs on the terrace, without so much as a cheerful bark ; the very birds in their cages hushed,—no wonder that Miss Neville, submitting to the influence of the day, was unusually preoccupied. Mr. Neville at last came in with the day's *Times*, and instructed us as to the foolish nature of that journal regarded from a classical point of view. He talked a certain number of pages off, and though no one knew exactly what it was about, we all felt it a relief, I believe, to hear an uninterrupted flow of words after the oppressive silence.

But the longest afternoon will come to an end, and the dressing-bell at last rang. I had not been alone five minutes when the door opened, and Hubert Rochford entered.

“ Pardon me,” said he, rapidly, “ I thought

it well that you should be prepared for a death which I have just seen in the paper, and that you should learn it when you were alone. It is that of a person you had no cause to love; but so awfully sudden a death will shock you." He pointed to a paragraph:

"At Algiers, on the 20th instant, of cholera, after a few hours' illness, Frances, Lady Greybrook, in the 51st year of her age."

I dropped the paper.

"Poor, unhappy woman! dying in that way, without warning or preparation! God, in his mercy, forgive her!"

"Can *you* forgive her all the grievous wrong she did you? If so——"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Rochford. What am I, that I should judge any one? I have forgiven her from my heart already."

"It is almost more than I *can* do," he exclaimed, violently. "She was the cause——" He broke off suddenly.

Maud stood in the doorway.

She was returning to fetch something she had forgotten, and, arrested by Rochford's excited voice and manner, seemed, for a moment, irresolute whether to advance or

retreat. Her clear, searching eyes pierced through and through me. She came quickly forward, took some work from the table, and left the room; but her cousin had passed out before her.

That night, when Miss Neville came into my bedroom, as she always did, to wish me good night, she said, in her straightforward, fearless way,

“I never saw Hubert so much excited as he was to-day, when I came into the room. Do you mind telling me what he was talking about?”

“He was showing me the death of—of some one I knew well—in the paper.”

She considered for a moment. “May I ask who?”

“An unfortunate person, of whom it is not probable that you ever heard—Lady Greybrook.”

“On the contrary, I have often heard of her. So you knew her, then? And why do you suppose my cousin was so moved in speaking of her?”

“She destroyed the happiness of some one Mr. Rochford once knew.”

“Of course you mean Miss Percival.”

I trembled to think how long my strength would stand this sort of ordeal. She continued,

"I suppose you knew her also? Don't be afraid of talking to me about her. I know the whole story: he told me everything himself, and I felt very much interested about her, until she married that horrid——"

"Married?"

"Didn't you know that she is now Marquise d'Ofort? We heard very lately from Paris all about it. I believe she was really to be pitied though, for that dreadful father of hers made some disgraceful match, and she was almost *forced* to accept this old man—they were married the same day. Mrs. Fisher wrote to us next day, and said Paris was talking of nothing else."

"I think you will find in this case, as in many others, that Paris tongues are far in advance of truth. Miss Percival is certainly not married, though her home was wretched, as you say. Whatever you may hear about her, let your kind heart, Miss Neville, remember that she was severely tried. Do not be too hard upon her."

"So you think she is not married?" said Maud, at last. "What, then, has become of her?"

"Who knows? What becomes of the leaf drifted from the tree? I believe she has left her home, and sought for an asylum somewhere."

"Have you no means of finding out where she is?"

"None, at present."

"Do you think——" She broke off, and after a pause, said, "Tell me all you can about her character. I know she is brilliant and attractive, and all the rest of it. Men, of course, are ensnared by that; but I want to know more—her *character*. What did you think of it? Hubert was not a fair judge."

"She was full of faults which needed severe discipline, and she has had it, in sorrow and disappointment of many kinds. Let us hope that they have produced some good result."

"I like that: I was afraid you were going to tell me she was a saint. I like her the better for her faults. I mistrust phoenixes—religious ones particularly. I dare say you

think it odd, now, that I am not furiously jealous of this girl; but really, I don't believe I am. I should like to ask you—I have a great curiosity to know—whether she cared for my cousin?”

“How could she, if he did not care for her? You would have a poor opinion of her, would you not, Miss Neville?”

“Oh! but his heart was *there*. Well, it is difficult to know men, as you will find out some day, my dear Miss Hope. I don't know how it is that I am drawn into talking with you thus, and so is my aunt, she says. It is curious, for I am sure you don't seek it; but I suppose we both feel instinctively that you have judgment and penetration—and there is something in your being so perfectly un-biased that makes one able to talk with you about these things. I have a great deal more I should like to say, but I mustn't keep you up any longer now. You look tired. Good night.”

What Miss Neville said of her aunt was curiously confirmed the very next morning.

The post came in late at the Hall. Mrs. Rochford and I were together when the bag was brought in: there was a letter for her,

and one for me. Mine was from my sister at Genoa, written a fortnight before, and announcing her speedy return to England. She affectionately expressed sorrow and surprise at the step I had found myself obliged to take. Charles was shocked to hear of my father's marriage; and, as I was not in Paris, they had given up their intention of stopping there, but looked forward to my being with them in London, where Rose expected to be confined. This was the essence of several sheets of foreign paper, crossed. The letter was directed to Brook-street (as I had desired her, when I wrote from London), and the housekeeper there, in conformity with my written instructions from Exton, had forwarded it on, under cover to "Miss Hope." Strange, upon what trifles hinge the greatest events of our lives! Had it not been——But all in its proper place: other things of that morning must first be told.

Mrs. Rochford had read her letter twice before I had finished my sister's somewhat illegible epistle. I stuffed it into my pocket as Mrs. Rochford rose and drew a chair

towards my sofa with a grave, perplexed air. She knitted for some time in silence. At last she said,

“When one has committed an error, one ought to repair it by every means in one’s power.”

I did not see that this self-evident proposition required any reply, and she continued, after a minute,

“I have a letter here which will gravely affect my son. It is a question of rendering justice to a person who has suffered great injustice. Unfortunately, a knowledge of the truth will not tend to make him happier, poor boy! rather the contrary; and yet I must not hesitate: my conscience says I must not—but it is a cruel thing. If I could be sure that he——”

She waited for a moment, and I said, gently,

“Truth is the only thing in this world we *can* be sure of, dear Mrs. Rochford. Opinions change, but that is unchanged. The nearer we can get to it *always* the better.”

“You say well, my dear, opinions *do* change. We live, sometimes, to see the

events for which we prayed turn out curses instead of blessings. It proves how miserably weak our judgments are. It should teach us humility: but it does not prevent keen self-reproach at the same time. I was always too proud, and now, in my old age, I am being taught this."

"However much you may have been mistaken, Mrs. Rochford, I am sure that you thought you were acting for the ultimate happiness of—of—your son."

She shook her head. "I was too ready to take my wishes for convictions. I am sure you knew Miss Lateward's old pupil, Marguerite Percival, though you have never mentioned her. You know that my son——"

"Oh yes! I heard all that—a tale of the past."

"I wish it were: it is a living and terrible reality for my poor boy. Since his engagement to Maud, far from changing the current of his thoughts, he is more depressed than ever. A month ago, when he heard that Miss Percival was to be married immediately to the Marquis d'Ofort, he told me that he believed his passion was cured—that it was

no more than a sort of romantic friendship, arising out of peculiar circumstances, and that he felt sure she never cared for him."

"He ascertained that, I suppose?"

"Why, I urged him so strongly to pause, from all I heard of her way of going on, and the set she was in, that he did so. He would not speak to her of love: he never allowed her to see *how* much he cared for her. He watched and waited, and at last, in desperation, he left Paris suddenly. He had every reason to believe she liked another person. Poor fellow! when he unexpectedly came home, he told me all—*all*. I thought he would get over it in time. I was grievously mistaken. I have much to reproach myself with."

"Since your son, Mrs. Rochford, so easily transferred himself, need you reproach yourself so much?"

"Ah! that is not a fair way of putting it. In the first place, it was not weakness, but strength of principle that made him resist his love. And it was not without a long struggle—not until he had given up all hope,

that he said that perhaps I was right, that he had better make for himself other ties, other objects of thought and interest, and try and forget the past. I urged him very strongly to this course, though I ought to have known his character better. But mothers are jealous, my dear—unconsciously so. They think nothing is good enough for their children, and are, above all, afraid of believing their son's reports in these matters. Had I been firmly persuaded that Miss Percival was sensible, innocent, and high-minded, such a girl, my dear, as you are——”

“Dear Mrs. Rochford, I pray, do not speak of me——”

“How gladly would I have welcomed her as a daughter! But all I heard of her disreputable father and her miserable home filled me with apprehension for my son. God knows now, whether it would not have been better than——Ah, me! it was always my dream that he should marry Maud, whose heart and disposition I knew so well—a daughter-in-law of whom I was *sure*, and who would be content to sit down quietly in the old house—(not that *I*

shall live with them; I move into the dower-house, a couple of miles off)—in short, a wife suited to that sort of life not always wanting company and excitement. Well, after all, you see I was wrong—wrong from the commencement—I know it now. Hubert has a true regard and brotherly affection for his cousin: he will always be kind and indulgent to her, I am sure of that; but his heart is not hers, and *he*, at least, will not be happy, I fear. It is *done*, so I say nothing; for, of course, he would never break off his engagement. I can only hope that Maud is blind, poor child! and does not feel his coldness, and that her eyes may never, *never* be opened. You are the only person, my dear Miss Hope, to whom I can speak thus. Between my son and me there always existed the most perfect confidence and affection, and now a cloud has come between us. There is something at his heart he cannot speak of to his mother. We are no longer the same towards each other."

She hastily brushed away a tear from her eyes, and opened the letter in her hand.

“But this is the worst part of all. I know how keenly he will suffer when he finds that these reports were false, to which I gave too ready credence. My Hubert will almost hate me !”

I had never seen Mrs. Rochford so moved before. She gave me the letter with a trembling hand : the excitement of unburdening herself of the secret trouble at her heart had proved too much for her self-command. The tears were falling thick on the paper, but she rose to her full height, and looking upwards, as if to invoke strength and council, walked to the window, to recover her composure.

The letter was from Lady Janet Ogilvie, at Paris, where she had arrived a few days previously. My eye ran down the first page and then the second, until I came to these words :

“I know, dear and valued friend, you would wish to hear the truth, and nothing *but* the truth, concerning a certain person. No one lother than you to deny her fair play, and she has not had it. To my disgust—which I made bold to express pretty

strongly—I find the tales which my relatives here have thought fit to credit and to circulate concerning the poor girl, are vile lies. Not a word of truth in any of them. She has neither married that old profligate, nor has she gone off with Lord Rawdon, as they pretended, for he has been in Paris ever since, and is a changed man, they tell me. There is no doubt he was very much in love with her. He has sold his horses and dismissed all his servants, and is going off to fight for the Hungarians, and hopes to be killed, I believe, like all disappointed lovers. Strange things people do in these days, to be sure! To return to poor Miss P., there is no doubt she *has* run away from her home, but it was to escape the iniquitous conspiracy of her father and his new wife to marry her against her will. I honour her for having resisted all their machinations, and I could really excuse her running away, if I knew that she was respectably married—even to a shoemaker. But I can find out nothing about her, except that she is in England. Whenever her father is asked, he professes ignorance, and says he supposes

when his daughter is tired of wandering about, she will return to him. He confessed to some one, however, that she was with a respectable English family, and if so, she is better than she could be at home. That wife of his leads him a pretty life, I hear: I'm glad of it. It would not interest you to hear of the scenes that are said to take place in that establishment already; and I have not Mrs. O.'s pen for scandal. I try to believe it was through inadvertence she wrote as she did: unfortunately, I must confess, she was always prejudiced against Miss P., and jealous of her besides—as I told her plainly. Women's tongues do enough mischief, my dear old friend, but their pens do much more. So, lest I should wax bitter against my own kith and kin, I'll stop.

“I hope Hubert's marriage may answer your expectations. You know *my* opinion of it; so I will only say, that I shall be delighted if I am *mistaken*, and if he has really forgotten a certain person; for I know this is the thing nearest your heart, and that you are delighted now that all chance of *the other* is at an end. You'll do me the jus-

tice to say I never encouraged it. She had been brought up in such a school, that it would have been a great risk (as I always told you) setting her down as your young squire's wife in the country. But a more honest-hearted young woman does not exist, I believe: I have never had good reason to change that opinion since the first day I saw her. So be good enough just to give the lie to these scandalous tales. Though it is not likely that you will ever come across her, or even hear of her again, still truth is truth. Give my compliments to Miss Lateward, and please to tell her all this," &c.

I laid down the letter, and reflected on the strange influence this old lady, personally so little known to me, had exercised already on my life. She had now placed in my hands the power, it might be, of changing my whole future. Never was a stranger position. It needed but a word from me—and I would not have spoken it then—no, not to have saved my life!

The window was open, for it was a mild May day; just wind enough to float the dappled clouds across the pale blue sky,

and to disturb the tops of the beeches opposite. The door opened to Miss Neville, and the sudden draught carried the letter from my lap, fluttering to the floor. I could easily reach it, however; and I looked for Mrs. Rochford, to return it, but she had left the room. Maud sat down silently to her work; then presently she came and stood by my sofa.

"You look ill; what is the matter, Miss Hope? I am afraid you are suffering more to-day."

"No, no; on the contrary, the doctor found my ankle so much better this morning, that I may be moved to Exton, he says, in three or four days, now."

"I have persuaded my aunt to send for Miss Lateward and Violet. She says she should like my cousin to know you; indeed, I think it is your society that has kept my aunt here herself so much longer than she intended. They arrive on Wednesday—you must wait to see your old friend. But you are so dreadfully pale, Miss Hope; I am sure you are not well. That letter contains some bad news, I am afraid?"

"Oh no! It is not even mine. Your aunt gave it me to read."

"Who is it from?"

"Lady Janet Ogilvie."

"Oh, give it me! Dear old lady! I always read her letters to my aunt. You need make no secret of it. I know that she is a great friend of Miss Percival's, and all that she has said in her favour, and I am curious to see what she thinks of her conduct now—how she explains it away—for I suppose she does so."

"This letter was clearly not meant for you, Miss Neville. Indeed, you must not read it. What relates to that other person is simply a refutation of——"

The door opened, and again the draught filled out the muslin curtains, and fluttered everything about the room. Mrs. Rochford entered with Mr. Bissett. Maud stooped to pick something from the floor.

"Good day, little woman! How are you getting on? and when are you coming back to us?"

"I hope on Tuesday, Mr. Bissett."

"Maud, Maud! What is the matter, child?" cried Mrs. Rochford.

I turned round ; but if Miss Neville's face exhibited any strong emotion the instant before, it had already completely passed, as she replied, calmly,

"Nothing at all, aunt. But let us leave Mr. Bissett to flirt with Miss Hope, for I want you to read to me some of this letter of lady Janet's—which isn't the least intended for me, I know."

Mrs. Rochford took the letter from her niece's hand, and they passed into the library together.

"I say," whispered Mr. Bissett, leaning his elbows on his fat little knees, so as to bring his face closer to mine, "things are going on in a queer way here, ain't they? He is a rum sort of lover, if all I hear is true; never with her, always moping about, solitary, and looking, I am sure, as if he'd seen the Neville ghost, who roasted his wife up-stairs. I should be afraid of his following the example, if I was Maud. She's not the girl of spirit I took her for if she stands such——"

"Dear Mr. Bissett, don't you know that it is impossible to judge for other people in

these matters? Who among your acquaintance ever married the sort of person you expected?"

"That's true enough. Perhaps, like the old woman in the play, you think it is better 'to begin with a little aversion?' Lord! how I laughed at that, I remember, at the Bath theatre, more than thirty years ago. It's the reason *I* never married, Miss Hope. I never could find a woman I had an aversion to! He! he! But seriously now, sister and I often talk this business over, and she persists in saying that, because they're both excellent, steady young people, they——"

"Hush! Mr. Bissett, I am afraid of your being overheard. Pray let us change the subject. It is no business of ours, is it? Would you kindly look on the floor, I think I dropped an envelope."

"Not visible to the naked eye, my dear young lady."

"How provoking! Perhaps it has blown out of window. What shall I do?"

"It is not upon the terrace," said he, looking out. "There is nothing but Miss Maud

stepping out of the library window, and the peacock strutting up and down—perhaps *he* has taken to writing, and has borrowed your envelope—the impertinent coxcomb ! Well, upon my life, now, that *is* the queerest couple ! There is Rochford coming up the avenue, and immediately Maud sees him, she almost takes to her heels. Very strange, to be sure !”

But I am too disquieted to listen to Mr. Bissett. Further search after the missing envelope is equally unavailing. If it has *not* blown away among the trees——

The old gentleman at last takes his departure, and the afternoon passes without my again seeing Maud. But towards dusk Mrs. Rochford comes into the room, and says, in her sorrowful voice,

“ It is at last done. He took the letter more calmly than I had expected—not a reproachful word or look : he only said, ‘ I should have known it all along, mother.’ He looked so miserably ill, poor dear fellow, I had not the heart to remonstrate when he said, soon after, that he must go to London on business, and should be away some days.

‘ Make the best excuse you can to Maud, for I have letters to write which will prevent my being with you this evening.’ He leaves us to-morrow morning at daybreak. God knows, Miss Hope, how it will all end !”

CHAPTER XVI.

A LETTER lay upon the dressing-table that night when I was wheeled into my bedroom. Before I looked at the handwriting I felt certain as to the writer. I knew it came from Hubert Rochford. But not until Betsy had left me, with a light upon the table by my bedside, did I tremblingly break the seal, and read as follows:

“It is impossible for me to continue living under the same roof with you, day after day, eternally parted as we are. I can bear it no longer. I leave this to-morrow, and I shall not return until all chance of our meeting again is over. But at this moment, for the first and last time in my life, I must open my heart to you, my whole heart, not

to say that I have loved you with all my soul and strength—you must know that, as well as I know that you never cared for me. Otherwise I dare not write thus, Miss Percival. But it is because you never felt towards me more than a friendly indifference which has latterly hardened into contempt, and because I cannot live under that contempt, that I must speak once, before I am silent for ever.

“You say to yourself—I have read it in your eyes—‘He loved me once, and yet so light a thing is this man’s affection, that he could believe every vile story that was circulated about me, and has even transferred his love already to another woman.’ Hear me in justification. Our acquaintance was a strange one from its commencement. Though young, I felt myself called on, in some peculiar way, to be your mentor. I had a Quixotic desire to save you from the dangers that surrounded you; and this I endeavoured to do partly through Lady Janet. My efforts failed, but I learnt two things: that you had a strength and clearness of mind which would prove good shields

to you, and that I was not the man ever to captivate your heart. If, once or twice, I thought otherwise, you quickly undeceived me. When I spoke of better things than you were accustomed to hear of, you showed, indeed, some interest; but I suffered tortures when I perceived that you took a far other deeper interest in the conversation of a man against whom I tried to warn you, for I knew his character too well. I believed that he loved you as he had loved a dozen other women before, and my heart was full of bitterness when I saw you exercising your influence over him. I heard it often repeated that you were vain, frivolous, worldly. I tried to believe it. You often disappointed me; sometimes carried away by excitement, sometimes flattered by what was utterly repelling to me. It was natural, for you were young, and it was all new to you; but my mother implored me more and more in her letters not to try and obtain your affections—to fly the temptation rather, while there was yet time.

“Then began that violent struggle within me which has been going on ever since. My rigid education, the self-control my mother

taught me from a child to exercise, have imposed a restraint on me which has passed in the world for coldness. I am content it should be so: but to *you*——

“I will not refer to the circumstance that at last determined me to quit Paris at a few hours’ notice. Suffice it, I believed I had convincing proof of your attachment to that other, and I resolved, by a sudden wrench, to terminate this struggle. My excellent mother only exacted one promise from me on my return home—that I would not see or write to you for the space of twelve months. ‘If at the end of that time your affections are still the same, my son——’ But long before then we learnt that you were to be married! Ever since I was a boy, my mother has talked of Maud as my future wife. She now again urged on me her many admirable qualities. Had I needed another proof of them, her treatment of poor outcast Marie would have been sufficient. She was content to take me as I was, knowing that I had no heart to give—that its fire was already burnt out at another altar—and so I became bound to her, and am hers for life!

“Then came the cruelest trial of all. Why did we ever meet again ? Far happier for me had we not done so. The mystery you assumed, coupled with all the tales that reached us, perplexed me, while I felt all the old love within me unextinguished. And that love was now crime. I tried to harden my heart against you—in vain ! Bitter has been the pang to see my mother growing day by day to love you, and to think of what *might* have been ! And now that the Marguerite Percival who has been so calumniated stands acquitted in her eyes—now that the shadow that overhung you has been fully cleared this day—it is but tardy justice, most brave and noble-hearted girl, to humbly beg your forgiveness for having wronged you in thought for one instant. My heart is stirred to its very deeps when I think of all you must have suffered ! I well understand now, how, going forth into the world alone to fight your way, you thought it well to leave your name behind, with home and its associations. I see it all.

“Farewell ! Pray for me, Marguerite,

for I am very wretched. But, happily, I am the only one to suffer. Some day, when the present cloud is overpast, you will be happy. For myself, I dare not look forwards—it is a dreary path. With high aims and aspirations at the onset, I have already broken down! I tried to teach others, and was ignorant of the first great secret of life, myself.

“God bless and keep you.

“R.”

My fingers slowly relaxed their grasp of the letter; it fell upon the coverlid, as my head sank back upon the pillow. And there I lay, in a sort of trance or stupor, which was not sleep, I believe, though it closely resembled it. I say I *believe*, for what followed, was it the working of my perturbed imagination in a dream, or an actual transaction of which I was dimly conscious?

Methought a figure clothed in white glided into the room, and pronounced my name in a low clear voice, and behold, I could not speak! The words laboured in my breast, but found no outlet. And the

figure came and stood beside the bed, and its eyes shone down on me with a sorrowful light. Then it knelt and prayed in the awful stillness, through which I heard the ticking of the clock outside, and the beating of my heart within. And as the figure rose from its knees, with a calm face as of an angel, methought its eyes fell upon the open letter. There was a start—a moment's hesitation—and the trembling hand was stretched towards it.

"I am justified," said the low clear voice, "for this is the only way to remove all doubt. To-morrow will be too late."

The perspiration started on my forehead. In vain I endeavoured to call out—to move hand or foot. I struggled under this terrible nightmare till, from pure exhaustion, I fell into a profound sleep—oblivion, at least—dreamless, without a care.

I awoke to daylight streaming through the window, and the early chattering of birds. There stood the night-light burnt down into its socket, and there the letter on the bed as I had left it. The clock struck six.

“He is off by this time—it is all over!—a few more days now, O my heart, and all these shall have passed away, and you shall hear their name no more!”

I lay moaning and tossing on my pillow as Betsy entered. She drew back the curtains, and threw open the window.

“Oh, my! well, patience me! If there’s not the young squire a sweetheartin’ with miss in the garding at this hour!”

“Impossible! Mr. Rochford was off an hour ago. The mail passes at half-past five.”

“Yes; but Mrs. Rochford was took ill last night, and tumbled in a faint like in her room, and got a severe confusion of the cheek, which ain’t of no account, and was quickly got to. But miss gives Jeames a bullet this morning to take to him—that is, the young squire—just as he were starting, so in course he stopped.”

An hour later came a knock at the door. I was lying on the sofa, dressed, when Mrs. Rochford entered in a morning wrapper, pale and agitated, and yet with a happier look in her eyes than I had ever seen

there. She motioned Betsy to leave the room, then silently threw her arms round my neck.

"My child—my dear, dear child!" she said, at last, "I know all, and so does Maud. How blind I have been!"

"What—what do you mean, Mrs. Rochford?"

"That my boy is free. Maud has herself cancelled their engagement. She told him that she did not love him as a wife should—that she felt herself unsuited to him—and she also told him something else. It only wants a word from you now to make you *really* my child. I felt as if you were so from the moment I first nursed you, though I never suspected the truth. Forgive me, dear—forgive me all the misery I have caused you, and let me be the bearer of glad news to my poor boy in compensation. Maud says she knows you love him, though he will not believe it. Thank God! it is not too late. Now that I know you, it seems so strange, dear child, that I should ever have thrust you from me; but you *do* forgive me and *him*, don't you? Say that

you forgive *him*, at least, for it was my doing, dear—all my fault.”

The strong woman fairly sobbed upon my bosom. And she was the bearer of my message, reader—of such a message as I never thought to have sent on earth, though I hoped the angels would carry it to him some day from heaven.

And when by-and-by he sat beside me, holding both my hands within his, and those deep, earnest eyes fixed upon my face, it seemed too great happiness to be true—the sudden revulsion was hardly natural. There was one test which yet remained to be made—words which I felt must be said, and which I trembled to say.

“Hubert, is there no question you would ask? No doubt you would have explained? Once I disdained to justify myself to you; now the case is different. Hubert Rochford’s wife must not even be suspected. Is there nothing you would know?”

“Nothing, dearest. I desire only to forget so much of the past as has intervened since I first knew you. I believe few women

are so tried, and fewer still come out of the fire unscathed as you."

"Are you sure of that? What if I told you that I left home under Lord Rawdon's protection?"

He was silent for a moment.

"I should only feel the more keenly how much you must have suffered before you took that step; and I should know that you had repented of it *in time*. Against all facts I should bring the fact of your pure, candid brow and eyes, my Rita. That is enough for me. If you have erred, I desire not to know it; so, too, have I, and with far less excuse. Let us forget this past. I am trying to do so while I hold you thus in my arms. Help me, dearest, and never let us refer to that dark season."

"If I am to be your wife, Hubert, you must know all. From my husband there must be no reserve." And when I had told him my story, I added, "These are dark and troubled waters from which to take a wife, Hubert. Have you thought well? The world's tongue has been too busy with my name to be easily stopped when——"

“Hush!” said he, smiling, and putting his hand before my mouth, “I must stop yours to begin with. You are a pearl of great price, my Rita, and they only who dive deep find such. We have gone through the troubled waters, and, with God’s blessing, all now shall be fair sea.”

CHAPTER XVII.

It is related—and we will not question the truth of the story—that a certain traveller, on visiting a Chinese burial-ground, expressed his surprise to see that none but infants were buried there, the ages inscribed on all the tombs averaging from one to three years. “We calculate the length of a man’s life,” was the reply, “not by the days he has lived, but by the amount of happiness he has enjoyed.”

According to this estimate, I may say I am ten years old. We have been married just that time, and each year, instead of taking from, has added something to my almost perfect happiness. We have two children, and between my husband and them I have never any inclination to stir from home. My dear mother-in-law, who lives in the dower-house

a mile or so from us, smiles at my increasing laziness each year, when the time comes round for us to go to London ; for my husband is now in Parliament, and fulfils his duties there, as he does in every position, faithfully and well. If you wish to know his politics, they are pretty nearly those of Mr. Gladstone.

I take a great interest in our village, and flatter myself I am nearly as efficient in my superintendence of the school as if I had not been a Paris-bred young lady. A never-failing source of pleasure, also, are the improvements about our old place. It is hardly recognisable since we threw down hedges and fences, and turned the swamp into a lake, and planted groves, and laid out terraced gardens round the house. Every one has his weak point; this is mine: I think my home perfection. If you come and see me, remember you say something pleasant about a place that is not richly endowed by nature, giving more scope for improvement at the hand of man.

I made up my mind that I would not write this until I could finish my story by announcing that Maud Neville was married.

We began to despair of her ever finding any one for whose sake she would relinquish her liberty, and who she would believe sought her for herself and not for her large fortune. At last—and she is nine-and-twenty—she has found this happy some one, and who do you think he is? My brother Ernest; who returned from India eighteen months ago on sick leave, and came down to us at once to spend the winter. A very handsome man he is; and though looking ill when he first arrived, his long rides over the downs (when Maud and he galloped far ahead of us) soon restored his colour and spirits. Having been long without seeing anything so fair and fresh as Maud, he naturally fell in love at first sight: she was “just a woman to my taste,” as he remarked the first evening to me, “not a flight above me, as some women are, but a jolly girl, without any kind of humbug.” It did not by any means follow, however, that Maud should reciprocate this sudden flame, any more than that of the many young gentlemen who had by turns bowed down before her. She was nearly three years his senior; but Love laughs at such obstacles, and before

long it became evident that Maud's obdurate heart was at length captive. I am bound to say that my brother was ignorant of Maud's fortune; when he proposed, he asked her to accompany him back to India in six months' time, and this, as much as anything, showed her the disinterestedness of his attachment. A finer, more noble-hearted fellow it is impossible to meet; the very pattern of a soldier as he was, and of a keen sportsman and liberal country gentleman as he now is. And though I cannot say that he is of much use as a magistrate, or in carrying out our various schemes for improving the condition of the poor, he is the best rider across country, the best racket-player in the Anchester court, the handsomest man in our county militia, of which he is now major, and indisputably the most popular host in the neighbourhood. For I forgot to mention that Mr. Neville died four years ago, and as the young squire entered a cavalry regiment when the Crimean war broke out, Maud lived alone at the Hall until her marriage. Poor Willie Neville was one of those who, having borne the burden and heat of the day, sank from exhaustion at

the eleventh hour, just as his regiment was embarking to return home. Heavy was the sister's mourning for her early friend and companion; and it was a merciful arrangement of Providence that she should meet, a few months afterwards, that other friend and companion who will never leave her now, but has promised to share her joys and sorrows till death do part them. So she still lives at the Hall, which is hers: she is very happy, and the last time I was there it was for the christening of a baby, who was named Willie, in memory of the last young squire.

My twin-brothers are doing well in their several professions, partly owing to my husband's exertions, but more still to their own merits and perseverance. Arthur has a good curacy in the west-end of London. He is earnest and devoted in his labours, and an especial favourite with the female portion of his congregation, being of gentle demeanour and high church principles. He occasionally gets a holiday and comes down to us, when he and my husband have long theological discussions after dinner, from which I am always glad to escape. Roger has not

yet served his time for his lieutenancy, but he writes to me in high spirits from Canton, looking forward to the hope of distinguishing himself, as there is a chance given us of "licking the Chinese."

Dear old Lateward lives still with Mrs. Rochford, though Violet has, of course, long ceased to require a governess. It is an understood thing that she will never leave her, as they suit admirably, and in the event of her daughter's marrying some day, Mrs. Rochford will want a companion in her solitude.

Rose has a very large family. She is now Lady Murray, old Sir Charles having been gathered to his fathers a few months since. The present baronet is little changed since I first knew him, except that he rides sixteen stone, and does not blush when he comes into a room—perhaps because his face is in a more continuous blush than it was then. They are very happy in their way, which, of course, would not be *my* way, but I have learnt to let people be so according to their own fashion and capacity. For though I could wish that my sister were less fond of dress, and thought more of her children's

minds than of their faces; and though when we meet I always find the conversation flags after the first hour or two, seeing that it is reduced to people and is shut to the world of books and thoughts; and though, moreover, Sir Charles and she have many a little tiff, in which his "Rose is washed, just washed, by a shower" of tears, plentifully at command, I know that nothing could materially increase her happiness, and that few husbands would be as indulgent as hers.

It only remains for me to speak of two persons who have played prominent parts in these pages.

Rawdon was not killed in the Hungarian war, as he expected. He lives, and is still unmarried. He played an active part in the Crimea, taking out provisions in his yacht, visiting the hospitals, and serving as a volunteer at the siege of Sebastopol. He came to see me, in London, on his return. He was much changed: grown very grey and old, but calm and cheerful in his manner. He brought with him a little girl, whom he told me he had adopted after the battle of Inkermann, where its father, who was a sergeant, was killed.

"The poor fellow died in my arms. I promised to look after his child, for the mother had been carried off by fever some weeks before. I took it, and it has been with me ever since. I had no object in life, and we all want one, Mrs. Rochford, so this child has become mine now."

He smiled—that old peculiar smile of his—and we shook hands cordially.

I said I was "almost perfectly happy," but I too, like the rest of the world, have my 'skeleton in the closet.' In the sunshine of my life there stands one figure which, though from afar, sometimes sends its dark shadow across my home. That shadow is my father's. I have seen him twice during these ten years, and the object of each visit has been to apply to my husband for money. He and his wife occupy different apartments, and are strangers to one another. The effort Madame made to be admitted into society having failed, she no longer required the tiresome and expensive luxury of a husband: so she allows him a small pension, upon the express condition that he does not inflict his society upon her. His habits, I fear, remain unaltered.

As in youth and middle life, so in old age; the same appetites, but with enfeebled powers. And Society, acting upon her well-known generous principle, has become virtuous and severe towards him, and nods distantly in the street to the once handsome Guardsman, now that he shuffles and is somewhat bent with time: and Society shakes her head, too, over his way of life, now that he has only himself to vent his spleen upon, though she smiled and palliated the same in that gay and pleasant gentleman who was breaking his wife's heart, and bringing his children to beggary.

THE END.

C. WHITING BEAUFORT HOUSE, STRAND.

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